

# Full of Days

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A Novella

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## **Part 1**

### **Hello, Mother**

## Chapter 1

When Henry walked through the front door with three growlers in his hands, my first instinct was to ask how he had gotten them. My twenty-year-old brother definitely did not obtain them legally, and with his stories I'm sure he'd spin a good reason for having them.

My second thought was that it was a Thursday night. Didn't he have class on Friday?

"Hey, Adam," Henry grunted as he set the heavy glass containers of beer down on the kitchen table. "Up for a drink?"

I motioned to the book in front of me. "I'm doing homework. Isn't that what you should be doing?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't have anything due until next week. Thought I'd get the weekend started early with you guys."

"What about class tomorrow?"

"Nothing until noon." Henry had already uncapped the first growler and poured himself a glass of amber liquid. He sat down at the table, opposite me, and took a sip. "Come on, Adam. Have a drink."

"No. You bought them underage," I said, pointing my pen at my brother's face.

Henry groaned. "Oh, come on! Really? That's your excuse?"

"And anyways, how did you even manage to get a growler, let alone three?" I asked.

"I went over to 4<sup>th</sup> Street Bar. They don't card during the day, and the bartender knows me." Henry winked one brown eye at me. "See? It's good to know people."

"Yeah, yeah," I mocked, picking up my book. "It's almost as good as studying."

As I was leaving the table, my housemate, Orey, came into the kitchen. "Awesome. What'd you get, Henry?"

“I got us a bottle of some lemon shandy, a bottle of Goose Island 312, and some good ol’ draft Yuengling.”

Orey nodded his approval as he poured a glass of the Yuengling. “Excellent. Nothing like a good draft beer.”

Henry smiled at me. “Hear that? Nothing like it. Sure you don’t want to have just one drink with us?”

I sighed. He always did this to me. I’m trying to study, and he’s trying to have fun. I’m trying to stay in when he’s ready to go out on the town. “Fine. Once I get through this chapter I’ll come have a beer or two with you guys.”

“I’ll take it!” Henry said, raising his glass in the air. “But hurry up, before Brandon catches wind of these bad boys.”

I turned my back and climbed the stairs to the second floor. I closed my bedroom door and sat myself down at my desk, opening my textbook to the chapter I’d been working through.

Sometimes it irked me how unconcerned Henry was. He was living the optimal college life, unburdened by such menial tasks as studying and homework. Which never seemed to make much sense considering that he was a chemistry major.

But then there were those few days when he was exactly what I needed. His generally laidback attitude calmed the whirlwind of graduate law studies. Having a couple undergraduate sophomores like Henry and Orey living in the house helped balance out us graduate students. They reminded us of simpler, drunker times.

And that’s one reason why I eventually went back downstairs to have a couple pints with Henry, Orey, and my fellow law student and housemate, Brandon. As much as I hated to admit it

to Henry, I enjoyed taking breaks from studying to just sit around the kitchen table with those guys and have a conversation.

When I reentered the kitchen sometime later, Henry asked me, smirking, “So how was that chapter?”

I threw him a sideways glance as I reached for the growler of lemon shandy. “Hey, just be grateful I came down at all.” I sat down at the kitchen table and crossed my foot over my other knee. “But the chapter was boring as hell.”

Henry nodded knowingly. “I thought so. Well, at least you made it down. Brandon’s already three deep. The Yuengling’s almost gone.”

“What?” Brandon said, rocking on the back legs of his chair. “It’s trivia night at the Thirsty Scholar. I’ve got to get my head in the right place.”

“I would think sober would be the right place for your head during trivia night,” I said.

“Nah,” Brandon belched. “Alcohol loosens up the tongue and the mind. You don’t second-guess yourself as often.”

Orey stretched, groaning, “Yeah, but you also say twice as many stupid things.”

“And that’s why I have teammates,” Brandon laughed. He drained his glass and set it down on the table with a satisfied sigh. He stood patting his growing belly. “Welp, guess I better head over to grab a table. Thanks for the beer, Henry.”

“See ya,” Orey and Henry said. “Good luck.”

Orey looked down at his half-filled glass. “Maybe I should try Brandon’s approach for our o-chem exam on Monday.”

I just shook my head, but Henry laughed out loud. “No, I don’t think that’d be a good idea.”

Orey's skinny shoulders shook slightly as he joined in the laughter. "No, probably not. Though you could always take my test for me. I'd be sure to get a good grade then."

Henry finished his glass and shook his head of shaggy brown hair. "No, that wouldn't be good either. But I'll tell you what. How about we take the rest of the Yeungling and go study?"

The grimace on Orey's face told Henry exactly what he thought about that idea, but nevertheless he grabbed the nearly empty growler and followed Henry upstairs to study. I was left at the table with an unopened growler and a glass of shandy. I took another sip, slowly moving it around my mouth. The faint zing of citrus was refreshing and helped the bitter beer slide down my throat. All in all, it was a good beer. So I remained seated at the table and finished it.

Afterwards I capped the growler containing what remained of the lemon shandy and put it and the Goose Island 312 in the communal fridge. The four of us had stuffed the appliance with various Subway sandwiches and slices of pizza from multiple days of the week, all in different stages of being consumed. And for some reason we had four dozen eggs. I'd never seen any of my roommates eat that many eggs.

Brandon and I were both graduate students attending the law school at The Ohio State University. Orey and my brother were undergraduates who had filled in the two spots on the lease vacated by my previous roommates. They had graduated the year before and moved on to start their careers as engineers. They figured five years of college was enough, but Brandon and I had stayed to put ourselves through even more grueling coursework.

We'd been living in the same townhouse for the past three years. The same *Pulp Fiction* poster had been hanging over the couch in the living room since the day we moved in. The couch had seen its share of rear ends as we gathered around the 32" flatscreen TV for *Lord of the Rings*

– *Extended Edition* marathons and Disney Power Hours. And we'd seen our share of Disney Power Hour aftermaths when we or our friends passed out on that same couch. We'd hosted our share of unforgettable nights that we couldn't remember, all of which took place in that front room. But it wasn't until Henry and Orey joined the house that a new poster of *The Boondock Saints* joined the living room wall. Now the four of us lived together as a group of guys with two growlers of beer and four dozen eggs in the fridge.

I closed the refrigerator door and climbed the stairs that led out of the kitchen to the second floor. I went into my room, closed the door, and broke open my textbook again.

## Chapter 2

There came a knock at my door, followed by a pause so short that I didn't even have time to turn in my chair to face the door before Henry came into my room. He sat himself down on my bed, facing me. "Sup?" he asked.

I gave him a small smile. "Nothing much. 'Sup witchu?"

Henry shook his head with a shrug of his shoulders. "Oh, nothing. I'm just bored out of my mind right now."

"It's a Saturday."

"I know, that why I'm so bored." Henry threw himself backwards, bouncing slightly off the mattress. "No class, no studying, no meetings, no nothing. It's two o'clock in the afternoon and there's nothing that I have to do. Therefore I'm sitting on my ass doing nothing."

"So you came to bother me about it?" I asked.

"Obviously," Henry flung his arms out to the sides, looking like a drunken Vitruvian man. "If I don't talk to someone, I'm just going to take a nap."

"What's wrong with a nap?"

"I just woke up two hours ago!" Henry said sitting up. He rubbed his face and pushed his cheeks together, looking off to the side. He sighed and asked, "Are you joining Orey and I tonight?"

I spun away from my brother, turning back to my textbooks and open laptop. I started scrolling down the webpage I had open, not really absorbing anything. "Yeah, that was the plan."

"Good," Henry said. "I wanted to make sure you hadn't changed your mind."

Shaking my head, I responded, "Why would I have changed my mind?"



Henry joined me at my desk, staring at the screen scrolling so fast that both of us had difficulty seeing anything other than one or two random videos and headlines. “You always change your mind. You never come out with me.”

“No.” My chair squared with Henry. “I never change my mind. I don’t always come out with you, but I when was the last time I backed out?”

“Last week.”

“Last week I had an exam on Monday. I told you I would be studying all weekend.”

“Two weeks ago you refused to go barhopping.”

“Yeah, but I never said I would go in the first place!”

Henry smiled. “Fine, but you’re coming out tonight. No backing out now, or I’ll know you’re a liar.”

“Well we all already know you’re annoying.” I grabbed a pair of dirty socks by my feet and threw them at Henry. “Go and take a nap or something. Something to keep you quiet.”

Henry left and closed my bedroom door behind him, but not before poking his head in to inform me, “By the way, I just farted. Enjoy!”

It lingered for far too long. I could smell the rank whether I placed my shirt over my nose or not. I couldn’t leave my room in case Henry was waiting for me in the hall, but it was quite unbearable to stay in my room. I opened the window, hoping to clean the air, but the air was too cold for me to let it enter the room for any length of time. So I forced myself to get used to that awful, sulphurous stench my brother had so kindly gifted me. It must have been all those eggs. Somebody had to be eating them.

## Chapter 3

It had been some time since I last went to a college party.

Those late nights I'd enjoyed during my senior year couldn't be counted. By the time I'd reached my final year of undergraduate study I was burned out, same as my friends. There was a time to be rowdy and unbelievably drunk, but our flame had been flickering for quite some time. We'd grown accustomed to the taste of beer and we drank it. We didn't chug it. We made cocktails, not mixed drinks. Whiskey and Cokes had become Kentucky Mules. Screwdrivers had become dry martinis. And we had become just a little too old to handle the incessant romp of the clubbing party.

But not so for Henry.

I knew what kind of night I was getting myself into when we were still four doors down. The target house was dark save for the periodic splashes of green laser lights that splayed across the front lawn, only to coalesce and disappear before repeating the pattern. An inordinate number of people milled about out on the front porch with bottles and red plastic cups in hand, talking, shouting, laughing, shooting pong, while the whole structure leaned slightly away from the house after years of supporting debauchery. The wooden paneling was getting old, but it seemed like it'd hang in there for one more party. One more party. Just like me. Even I still had the spark in me. It just needed the right prod to flare to life again: Henry.

I devoted one night each week to serious socializing, and Henry snapped at the chance to get me out of the house and into the fray. Before he'd joined me at OSU and well before my law studies, I'd taken a few years to myself. I let loose like I had never felt able my entire life, and this week Henry had chosen to relive that with me. He had chosen to par-tay. And who was I to deny him this one time?

When we finally managed to break through the morass of porch-dwellers and walk in the open front door, I suddenly remembered all those hazy and indistinct memories I had of similar situations.

The dark room with the laser lights illuminated a wide space of writhing hormones, not people, with their musky, heavy air floating over the dance floor to fog the windows and intoxicate the nose. The floor stuck to your foot, but you didn't care because you'd already planted yourself, a lovely lady companion rooted in place with you, only able to move closer to you in rhythm with the deep and sonorous punches of bass from the tower speakers in each corner of the room. But if you could manage to move your feet, you knew you had to make your way to the back of the room where the amateur DJ tried to regulate the sounds in the room so that everyone whose faces were only lit for brief intervals by laser light and strobes would be whipped into a frenzy and where a cool and hip fellow with supposed charm handed you more booze.

In some ways I gazed fondly over the crowd. This was a party. Choices could be made here that would never be made elsewhere because here there were options. The liquor was free so of course you could have that shot. There were so many women that of course you could hit on one. There were so many people that of course no one would see you sneak past the barricade to go use the upstairs bathroom, and maybe in the process find the roommate with the weed. And once you left through that front door, the majority of the night stayed behind except for those enjoyable instances when you left hand in hand with that lovely dancing companion.

But I'd passed that time of my life. I was here for Henry. It was his turn to gaze at all the myriad options the night was about to present him, but it was now my duty to help guide him to

the best choices so that when he did leave through the front door, maybe his memories would be a little more satisfactory and a little more complete.

Henry, Orey, and I pushed through the swinging, grinding mass of bodies on the dance floor to the makeshift bar at the back of the room. At this particular party, the bartender and DJ were one in the same. He doled out cans of cheap, light beer to the people impatiently waiting for their next drink. The mill of outstretched hands was three people deep so it took the three of us a while to get cans in hand. Then we wandered over to a corner, cracked our beers and cheered. To where the night may take us!

Orey saw a friend of his in the adjoining kitchen and quickly got lost in the crowd. Henry and I stood in the corner, trying to dodge a stumbling passerby as his flailing arms threatened our freshly opened beers. I turned to Henry and shouted, “So how’d you hear about this?” I gestured to the scene before us.

Henry’s head was bobbing along with the music, loud and impatient in our ears. “Friend of mine from the café is hosting.”

I nodded in understanding. I didn’t know who he was referring to, but Henry had recently started working at one of the on-campus cafes for a little extra cash. “You gonna go find him?” I asked.

Henry actually looked shocked. “I’m here with you! I’m not going to run off and leave you alone.”

“Go on, I’ll be fine.”

“No,” Henry shook his head. “I’ll stick with you. Come on, you’ll be my pong partner.”

I didn’t catch the last part due to a sudden increase in music volume, and shouted, “What?”

“Pong!” Henry mimicked tossing a ping pong ball into a cup.

I shrugged. “Sure!”

We fought through the dancers again, finding ourselves out on the sagging porch where the air was much clearer and quite a bit lighter. The game of beer pong was on one side of the porch, the long table covered with a myriad of beer cans in various states of consumption. Henry pushed his way over to stand next to one of the players, a lanky young man in button-down plaid shirt, khaki shorts, and light brown boat shoes.

“Anyone got next?” Henry asked the lanky player.

“Umm...” The player took a long, glazed look over the crowd on the porch. “I don’t see the guy who called it, so nope. You’re next.”

“Cool. I’m Henry, by the way.”

“Sean,” said the lanky player, pausing to shake Henry proffered hand before taking his shot. The light ball sunk into one of the last two cups on the opposite side of the table. The opposing team – two short girls, one with a floppy gray knit hat and both with blond hair and high-waisted jean shorts – picked up the cup and split the meager amount of beer between the two of them. Their return shots missed the almost complete set of cups by quite a bit.

I was shaking my head in both amusement and concern at their obvious lack of sobriety when Henry called me over to introduce me to Sean. The other teammate was Courtney, a girl of average height with curly brown locks and a sheer blouse that was barely buttoned and revealed a slim black band to cover her breasts. I caught Henry studying her attire rather intently; she was very attractive.

Courtney and Sean both made their next shots, ending the game. Henry and I scooted along the edge of the table to shoo away the blondies and rerack the cups in the traditional tringle formation. We tossed the ping pong balls back to the victors and promptly went down one cup.

“Wow,” Henry said before gulping down the beer. “You are quite good at this, Sean. How many games have you won?”

Sean had to stop and think for a moment, but Courtney spoke up, “This is game six. So we don’t expect to be leaving any time soon.” She grinned with a fiendish spark in her eye.

Henry gaped. “Did you hear that, Adam? We’re facing a couple of pros here.”

I just smiled. “Is that so?”

Nodding, Henry held up his ball, readying to take his shot. “Apparently. I guess we’ll just have to try our best and hope we can beat them.” He threw, sinking his shot. He straightened in apparent amazement. “I guess that’s a good start.”

I tossed my ball from my left hand to my right. “It’s good, but I don’t know if we can keep it up...” I threw, draining my shot as well.

“Oh, well let’s bring those balls back and see if our luck holds out,” Henry said.

We each shot again. We both made it.

“Well, hot damn!” Henry hooted. “Heating up! Come on, Adam. How ‘bout an uneven three for fire?”

We shot at the same time, the shots significantly harder now that we were four cups short of a full rack and the remaining six were scattered. We both missed, my shot bouncing off the rim of a cup in the back row.

Sean had his hands on his hips, his head wagging back and forth. “I thought you were going to sweep the table. I was getting a little scared.”

“Getting scared? Well, don’t worry. I’m sure Courtney’s got your back if you lose your nerve,” Henry said with a laugh.

Courtney laughed at that. “I’m always carrying him on my back!”

“Pssh, come on,” said Sean. “Then how do you explain this?” He took his shot, missing the cups completely.

Courtney simply said, “Exactly my point. Watch and learn.” She lined up her shot and threw the ball into the cup.

“Woah! Sean, I don’t know. Looks like Courtney might be right,” Henry joked.

“See? Somebody gets me,” Courtney said, leaning over the table to give Henry a high five. She shot a coy smile his way, which he returned.

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let you win.” Henry made his cup, and I again made mine. Before we knew it, the game was over. We had won: ten cups made to Sean and Courtney’s four.

I stepped around the table to shake Sean’s hand. “Good game,” I said.

He smiled. “Good game, man. Kinda glad I can finally leave this table and go get some more beer.”

I shook Courtney’s hand as well, but she hung around our side of the table as Henry and I prepped for our next match. She chatted with Henry throughout the next game, gradually dragging his attention away from his shots. We won, but just barely.

Halfway through the third match, Henry left to get more beer with Courtney, putting a girl named Tanya in charge of his shots until he came back. I watched Henry lead Courtney into the house, putting his left hand behind his back as he pushed through the crowd. When I saw Courtney’s hand reach out and clasp Henry’s, I knew he wasn’t coming back.

I turned to Tanya and asked, “So how’re you enjoying the party?”

She nodded, her lips pressed together. “It’s good. Pretty crowded though.”

I gave a low laugh. “Yeah, reminds me of some of the old parties I used to throw.” I threw my ball and made the shot. The match was crawling along as no one at the table could seem to manage a halfway decent shot except me. Maybe it was the lack of liquor in my blood.

“Do you not anymore?” asked Tanya. She ran her slim fingers through her straight black hair, revealing multiple piercings on the one ear. She cocked her hip to one side, placing her hand on her white shorts.

“No, I got too old for it. This isn’t really my scene anymore.”

She flicked her hair back over to the other side of her face as she looked up at me with a toothy grin. “Too old? Come on, you can’t be much older than I am, and I’m only 20.”

That was when the noise and the heat and the press of the bodies around me finally closed in and I said, “I’m actually 25. I go to law school here.”

Tanya seemed surprised for a moment, but she recovered quickly, erasing the look from her smooth features. “Well you’re a very good-looking 25 year-old. I would have never guessed.”

I refused to look at her. Whether she was hitting on me or not, and whether I was attracted to her or not – which I was – I suddenly knew I didn’t belong on that porch anymore. I quickly threw the game-winning shot and shook hands with the opposing team. Then I turned to Tanya and said somewhat stiffly, “Thanks. Glad I’ve still got my boyish charm.” I shook her hand. “It was a pleasure playing with you.”

I gave her a smile and left the table in search of Henry, or even Orey. It was time for me to leave. For too long I’d been ignoring the signs that times had changed, and so had I. The faces around me were still clear and memorable. I could recall all the names I’d learned that night, and



the heat and the stink of the dance room attacked my senses without remorse. This scene was no longer a blur of colorful moments for me. It was young and beyond the grasp of my heightened sense of morality in more ways than one.

The laser lights singled me out as the oldest one in the room instead of including me as a member. The dancing made me feel tired and more than a little concerned for the well-being of everyone in the room. The beer left an acrid taste in my mouth and my state of inebriation unchanged. The conversation was short and unengaged.

And I was a second year law student. I had more pressing concerns waiting for me at home than those of getting laid at some random party populated with younger women.

I searched for Henry and Orey on the back porch, on the dance floor, and in the basement. I pushed my way through clump after clump of shouting, laughing, swaying bodies but could not find the housemates I had arrived with.

After fifteen minutes of searching I finally decided to leave. Orey and Henry had both been able to make it home on their own before. I'd be sure to find them feeling worse for the wear in the morning, safe and sound back at the house.

So as I left through the front door of the party house, I left in much the same manner as I did in years past. Though I left this time with lucid recollection of the night's events, there was still that haze hovering over my mind that I had always had after a night out such as this. It always took some time to sift through the following day as I tried to make sense of everything.

## Chapter 4

That feeling of trying to reason out a solution from the tangled mess of a problem is one I never enjoyed. Some people thrive on problem solving, seeking to discover new answers, derive alternate routes to an end goal. I say to hell with that. I like it better when things are simple.

Living in Virginia was simple. Back when Henry and I were younger we'd lived in Northern Virginia. Our house was situated on a plot of land that seemed miles from anything except for the river. I could look out the back door and see the James River flowing past at the bottom of the hill that was our backyard. During the summer and early fall I liked to run down that hill and watch the canoes and kayaks.

Our town was a big place for canoeing and kayaking. Twenty minutes down the road was a campsite for all the overnights, with plenty of hiking trails and horseback paths beaten into the dirt of the surrounding mountains. I'd sit at the base of my tree or climb up into its branches and wave as people paddled—or more often floated—by.

Because that's what my childhood seemed to do in Virginia. It just floated by. Especially during those afternoons in the summer down by my tree. I called it my tree for a few reasons. Firstly, because it was in my parents' yard, so it had to belong to one of us. Secondly, because I was the one who went down to sit by it or climb it most every day. And thirdly, because there was a map that said so.

Little six-year-old me had an awful lot of guts. I'd already taken to calling the tree "mine," so I got a little peeved when others tried to climb it. I'd run up yelling in my high-pitched child voice to go away. This was *my* tree. But all the teenage canoers who had come ashore to cannonball off the branches into the river wouldn't listen. "This ain't your tree," they'd say,

climbing high into the branches where they'd sit as if the branch were a regal crown. "It's my tree now." So I went crying to the only people who'd listen: mom and dad.

My mother tried to explain to me that it wasn't my tree after all. I'd have to share it with people who wanted to borrow it for a little while. But my dad said no. Those teenagers should respect the fact that it's my tree. They could only use it if I let them. So he took me down to the local canoe outfitters and had me tell them the story about my tree. How everybody was always climbing on it and saying that it wasn't my tree, that it was theirs.

They said tell you what. We'll make sure everybody who canoes down the river in our boats knows that it's your tree. But will you still let them play on it?

I said yes, I guess that's all right. Just so long as they stop trying to steal it.

A week later in the mail I got the new river guide from the outfitters. The map showed the bends in the river, the best places to picnic, the areas to avoid, and the best places to jump in the river for a swim. One of those places was at the bottom of our backyard, and labeled on the map was "Adam's Tree."

I showed my mother, and she smiled. She congratulated me on the success and fighting for what I thought was right. I showed my dad and he smiled and picked me up in a great hug. Congratulations, champ, you did it. I smiled back.

Yes, it was a simpler time.

## Chapter 5

College had seemed like a simple solution. Go to school, go to class, go to law school, go get a job as a lawyer. And all the while I could do whatever I wanted. Be whoever I wanted to be because I'd already applied for students loans. Money wasn't an immediate necessity. Responsibilities had seemed to fade away. College could be my chance to begin again. To return to something simple.

But for me, my choices always seemed to have a way of leading me in concentric circles. I never saw the same path, yet they all felt oddly familiar. Henry's party had driven me outside again. Had cleared my head of simplistic notions and opened the door to so many intersecting ideals of the future and the world. These, though convoluted in their connections, were so much more understandable to me than the idea that the world could be simple.

That's why, the week following Henry's party, I went to apply for a job.

Two years into graduate studies and all I had to show for my time was an ever-growing mountain of debt. My student loans came in, but until now I hadn't put any thought towards paying them off. I'd tried to keep things simple and almost mired myself so deeply in the thought that I wouldn't recover. And I didn't plan on saddling someone else with my debt. So a job it must be.

Brandon tried to convince me otherwise. He said I'd kill myself trying to work and study. Law school's hard, he said. You need all the time you can get.

But I shrugged off his worries. I'd pushed myself hard before. I could do it again. And if I ever wanted to have any time that was truly mine in the future, I needed to be financially secure.

So I started with businesses surrounding campus. They weren't luxurious positions, to be sure. Most options involved the handling of fast food. But I needed a job now and couldn't wait to hear back from any potential offers in a law office.

Walking up and down High Street was chilling. The last glimpse of semi-warmth that had breathed over Columbus the past week was gone, introducing the pursed-lip harshness of Ohio winters. I ducked my head in and out of doors, hoping to find a place that would accept my application. The managers all physically took the paper from my hand, but few took much note. It was the curse and blessing of living near campus: businesses were always hiring workers, but were rarely ever investing in them. I needed something to work towards, not just an offhanded allowance of cash.

My next step was to find someplace outside of campus. Moving away from the one-way streets and careless pedestrians to the suburban plazas that held better options, but fewer prospects. The nearby restaurants and department stores held on to their employees, and they told me as much many times over with the simple phrase: "Sorry, we're not hiring right now." I found myself opening the car door more often than a store door. My time was spent in solitary contemplation of where to try next.

When I came to a red light, I closed my eyes and laid my head back. A small ache had developed around my temples, perhaps from dehydration or hunger, but most probably from frustration. I hadn't been impressed with any place I'd applied, and with each successive application filled and filed I lost interest in what I was doing.

It's just a job. It's just a job. It's just a job. It's just a job.

I sighed audibly and opened my eyes to check on the traffic light. Still red.

It was getting late now. The sun sat atop the horizon in a brilliant blaze of ruddy light, the sky blushing pink in its radiance. I lowered my car visor to cover the image. It only reminded me of how bleak all the streets and bare-branched trees were starting to look.

I pulled into the Lennox Town Center, a plaza just off campus and my last stop before calling it a day. There were plenty of department stores and restaurants in this area, even a movie theater. I parked the car and grabbed the pad of paper on the passenger seat. Unlocking the door and stepping out, I couldn't fail to notice the odd scent of rubber and gasoline that had recently started accompanying my car wherever it went. Making a note on my pad of paper, I locked up my silver sedan and walked towards the first storefront, keeping an eye out for reckless college drivers as I crossed the parking lot.

Once away from my car I no longer smelled the mechanical stench of my car, but the oily aroma of fries and other delicious greasy things served at the nearby restaurants. I turned to eye the brick face of the American eatery a few stores down. I'd be there soon enough. Maybe I'd get something to eat while applying.

But first I stopped in a shoe store. They weren't hiring.

I went next door where everything related to the dining room, beer and wine included, was sold. They weren't hiring either.

So I continued down the line of storefronts to continuing dismay. Target, Old Navy, suits, office supplies, American eatery. I didn't even stay to eat, though my stomach had started gurgling in a desperate plea for food. The heavy scent of burgers and sizzling of the grill was cut off by the glass door closing behind me, leaving only the smell of French fries to tempt me.

I applied at the movie theater and had real reason to thank the female manager in black pants and red polo. She'd all but offered me a job because the theater was short-staffed. I had an

interview the following week. If this job, or any other the myriad others I had applied for didn't pan out by then, my next move would be to reapply for fellowship through law school or find a teaching assistant position. The former was almost impossible to get as a law student, and the latter wasn't easy to come by. The bookstore was my last application.

The doors of the bookstore weren't all glass and steel like every other entrance in the plaza. These were made of wood. And glass. But wood most importantly, so that even as I entered the floor space of an international chain I still felt a little less like a customer and a little more like a visitor.

I walked past the front tables displaying this month's bestsellers to enter the rows of laden shelves. Dark lacquered shelves propped up myriad shades of jacketed spines, trade paperbacks, and tabletop tomes. In the center of it all was a help desk, a lanky man with drooping glasses the helper in residence.

"Can I help you?" he asked, warm smile belying his otherwise uninviting features.

I tapped my fingers on the countertop once. "I was wondering if you're hiring."

The lanky helper, whose nametag so helpfully identified him as Frank, sucked on his upper lip for a moment. He eked out, "Yes. I do believe we are. Here, why don't you fill out an application just in case, and I'll get my manager." He handed me a pen and a single sheet a paper from beneath the counter before taking his leave, muttering into his comm-set for another worker to take his place as maître d'help desk.

I dutifully completed the necessary fields of the application form, having done dozens others just like them earlier that day. Then I patiently waited for the final verdict from the manager. When Frank reappeared, he was following a relatively older man with short, but slightly curling, salt and pepper hair.

“Well, now. What do we have here?” the manager said. “Frank tells me you’d like to apply.”

“Yes, sir.”

He looked me up and down over a slightly hooked nose. “We don’t normally like your type, but I guess we could give you an interview.” He smiled then, and said, “Come on back. We’ll see if you’re worthwhile.”

I followed the man past the children’s section to a swinging door that led into the back. We passed stockroom shelves piled high with boxes to a heavy metal door which the manager opened. He sat at his desk with a hefty grunt and said, “Go ahead and close the door.”

I fulfilled his request and then sat, hands in lap and eyes forward. I had not expected an interview today. I definitely wasn’t dressed for the occasion.

“So,” the manager sniffed. “I’m Tom, and I’ll be interviewing you.”

I nodded my okay.

“Now, tell me, what sort of music do you like?”

I hesitated. “Umm, I guess I like most types of music. Except for heavy metal.”

Tom nodded. “You like Lady Gaga?”

I shook my head. “Not really.”

“You like classic rock?”

I nodded.

“Name three bands.”

“Classic rock bands?”

“Yeah.”



I shrugged, suddenly unable to think of any classic rock bands. I finally managed, “The Who, Queen, and The Rolling Stones.”

Tom licked his lips. “All are good, but you know,” he rapped the desk with his knuckles. “My favorite artist is definitely Journey.”

I just smiled and nodded. I didn’t know what else to do in response to his questions. They had nothing to do with the job, and I wondered if he’d just brought me back to have a chat about music. I was slightly relieved when he picked up my application.

“Everything here seems to shape up. You’ve got a lot of work experience, though most of it is older than six years.” He looks up at me with eyebrows raised and forehead wrinkled. “You were a busy kid, weren’t ya?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Tom waved his hand. “Ah, forget the sir. Nobody here does it. I’m just lucky they haven’t started calling me names. But keeping busy, I like that. Reminds me of me. Started working at my local bookstore when I was sixteen. Moved on up from there.”

Then Tom leaned forward, all easiness gone from his posture. “Why do you want to work at this bookstore?”

I continued to look Tom in the eyes, but I didn’t have an answer. Honestly, it was the last place before I got back in the car to head home for the night. I could tell him about how the place felt more welcoming, that I believed I could add to the homey feel of the store with charm and personalized customer service. I could say I just wanted to get a paycheck from the one store that didn’t seem to care as little as the others. I could say a multitude of things, so to start I said, “Well, I believe...”

I didn’t get any further.

“You’re hired,” Tom interjected.

“What?”

“You’re hired. You seem like a good guy, and we could use some younger folks working round the shelves. So I’ll go ahead and forward you all the info for getting your first shifts, and I’ll see you in a week or so.”

Tom stood with his hand outstretched, and I shook it, a little disbelievingly. But he led me back out to the sales floor, reintroduced me to Frank, and sent me on my way with a wave.

I got a burger to celebrate.

## Chapter 6

I heard Henry before I saw him. He was talking to someone as he came down the hall, but I couldn't tell who he was because my door was closed. All I thought was please don't bother me. Please don't bother me.

He opened the door and interrupted my studying. "Hey, hold on a second." He put a hand over the phone and said, "Mom's on the phone. Want to talk to her?"

"I'm really busy right now, so no."

He stared at me a moment before returning to the phone. "He's studying... Yeah, I know he hasn't called in month, that's why I asked him..."

I shoved my hands through the hair above my ears. I needed a haircut, among the million other things on my to-do list. And studying was number one if Henry would just leave the room.

"Okay, mom. I'll remind him more often to let you know he's still alive. I'll talk to you later... Yep. Love you, too." He finally ended the call and lowered the phone. "Seriously, Adam. You need to call mom every once in a while."

"I'm busy."

"You're always busy. When was the last time you called her?"

I looked past Henry and turned my hands. I didn't know. "Probably a month, like you said."

"Well, next time try at least every other week. Just a quick hello."

"Okay, great. I'll do that next time. Now please close the door, I really need to study."

"Just, one quick thing," Henry said as he sat on the bed. Sitting on the bed always meant he'd stay longer than for one more thing. I sighed and turned to face him when he asked, "You gonna come out again this weekend?"

“No. I’ve got a bunch of stuff I need to get done.”

Henry scoffed. “What, studying? You do that all the time. Come out with me and take a break.”

I closed my eyes and breathed out slowly. “No, I’m not going to be studying. I’ve got a job, and I’m working full shifts this weekend.”

That made Henry pause from tracing the pattern on my comforter. “Wait, you got a job?”

I hadn’t told him. “Yeah, just recently.” I swiveled in my chair to again face my desk.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

I licked my lips as I stared at the words written in front of me. “It only happened a couple weeks ago, and it’s not like I need to tell you everything that happens in my life.”

“No, but I like to know what’s happening.” Henry came to stand next to me. He looked down at me for a moment, then clapped me on the back with a short laugh. “But I know now, so congratulations! Where at?”

A small grin twitched at the corners of my mouth, despite the fact that I wanted him to leave me alone. “I got a job with Barnes & Noble over at Lennox.”

“No way. That’s great. But why’d you think it’d be a good idea to get a job when you’re obviously so busy with all of this?” he asked, gesturing in a wide circle at the papers, books both opened and closed, and laptop that all surrounded the book I was currently trying to read.

“I needed to start saving up money so I could pay off my student loans when I graduate.” I moved to clear up some of the things in front of me. It hadn’t bothered me how cluttered everything was until Henry pointed it out. But now with all the rustling from the many papers I was moving I suddenly felt a weight drop in my belly. I still had so much left to study.

Henry kept going. “But you’re already busy. I’m sure mom would understand if you just finished up law school first. Besides, then you’ll have a swanky lawyer job.”

Papers still rustled. “And if I don’t?”

Henry shrugged out of the corner of my eye. “Mom’ll help you with your loans.”

“No,” I said, standing. The pile of books and papers in my hands dropped to the floor with a thud. “I am *not* asking mom for help.”

“Why not?” Henry asked with brow furrowed and hands open in question. “What’s wrong with asking for help?”

“I’m not going to ask for help when I don’t need it. I’ve got a job now, and I’ll take care of it. I always have in the past.”

“But you don’t need to take care of it. Mom can help. Now I can help. Just let us know and...”

“No,” I snapped. “Look. Henry, I’m sorry, but I need to study. I’ve already got the job, and that’s that. Everything will be fine, and if I need your help I’ll ask for it. But I don’t. So will you please leave me alone and close the door?”

Henry still stood next to the desk, his arms folded and his head tilted to one side. He looked down as he tapped his bent toes against the carpet. “Fine. I’ll leave you to figure things out.”

He gave me one last glance before turning and leaving the room, closing the door behind him. Just before the latch engaged, he cracked the door ajar, only projecting his voice through the space, “Please let mom know about your new job.” Then he eased the door shut with a soft thud.

Then I sat down in my squeaky desk chair and got back to my quiet studying.

## Chapter 7

The clink of metal on glass, followed by a fleeting hiss, indicated Brandon was opening another beer bottle. The bottle cap clinked when it fell to the countertop.

“Brandon, if you keep drinking those you won’t be able to focus.” He’d already had four.

He returned from the kitchen counter to the table where we had our law books spread out in an even more chaotic mess than my room had been. “A cold beer reminds me of being relaxed on the beach. And right now I need to relax.”

We had a semester final in less than forty-eight hours. Bright and early Monday morning. And Brandon was not being cooperative.

“Brandon, drinking is not going to make this any easier.”

“Maybe for you,” he said, collapsing into a kitchen chair. He took a swig. “It’s definitely helping me. We’ve been at this for hours.”

I sighed and put my hands on either side of the textbook in front of me. “Fine. Then tell me if a police officer obtains a warrant for the search and seizure of rifles, but during the search find heroin in a purse and methamphetamines in travel luggage, which is admissible in court?”

Brandon tilted his beer back again, staring at the corner of the kitchen. “What’s the size of the purse?”

I frowned. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Sure it does. Have you seen those sorority girls and their big-ass bags? They consider those purses, and you could definitely fit a rifle in one of those.”

“Okay,” I said, scratching the back of my neck. “Let’s say it’s an average handbag.”

“How’s the warrant worded?” Brandon set his beer on the table and leaned back, balancing on the back two legs of his chair.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how is the warrant worded? Is it specifically worded for ‘the search and seizure of rifles’ or does it say ‘the search and seizure of weapons or weaponry materials, including, but not limited to, rifles?’”

“I don’t know,” I said. I pressed my fingers to my temples and closed my eyes for a moment. “The second way, I guess.”

Brandon dropped his chair back to the floor and rocked forward to grab his beer. “Then both the heroin and meth are admissible in court.” He gulped down some more beer.

I shook my head. “You changed the question.”

He snorted, waiting to swallow before saying, “No, you did. I just asked the right questions. Look, I don’t understand why we’re still going over this.”

“Because,” I started. I flipped a couple pages, and all I saw was more and more about admissibility of evidence in court. “Look at all this material. It’s all the cases that relate to search and seizure, admissibility of evidence...”

“Right, *Weeks v. United States*, exclusionary rule, ‘fruit of the poisonous tree.’ I’ve got it. It’s a lot, but as long as you know the trials and the law you can reason your way through any of those stupid long ‘what if?’ questions that Dr. Farmer throws on his exams.” Brandon shook his head and raised the bottle to his lips. “God, I hate those questions. They’re like half a page long!”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” I rested my forehead on the tips of my fingers. “There’s so much that he can throw at us on this exam.”

“And we’ve been through it all. Twice.” Brandon stood up and finished his beer. He tossed it from where he stood into the trashcan some feet away. “Woo, glad I made it.”

“Why would you throw a glass bottle in the house?” I closed my eyes with a shake of the head.

“‘Cause I felt like it.” Brandon shrugged and walked away. He opened the fridge and laughed. “Why the fuck do we have so many eggs?” He popped his head over the fridge door. “Dude, are any of these yours? They’re going to go bad.”

“No,” I said. “I have no idea whose they are. Can we get back to studying?”

“Oh, come on, Adam.” Brandon let the refrigerator door go and it shut beside him. “Stop worrying so much. You’re going to give yourself an ulcer.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Between studying and work... Dude, I don’t know why you got a job when you’re dealing with law school. But you’re going to go insane. You’ve already studied all of this, probably way more than I have. And I feel comfortable with it.”

“Well I don’t. So I’m going to keep studying.” I turned away from Brandon and braced my elbows against the table.

“Well I do, so I’m going to head to the bars. Maybe find Henry and Orey. Because you were right, those beers are starting to get to me.” He chuckled, but then he stopped and said, “Good luck, Adam. I’ll talk to you later.”

“See ya.” I heard Brandon leave the kitchen, the front door close behind him, and the jangle of keys as he locked up the house. Though I couldn’t study with him anymore, at least I didn’t have to deal with his knack for getting distracted. All afternoon I’d been trying to keep Brandon on task, and all afternoon he kept popping beers. And before that I had to deal with Henry, bursting into my room, asking me if I’d called mom yet.



Each time I'd said no. And each time he'd asked why until finally I said, "Because I don't want her to have to worry about paying for *my* loans. They're mine, not hers. So I will pay for them, one way or another. No leave me alone."

He did leave me alone then. It was an extended period of silence, too. No unexpected bursts into the room. No periods of time where he was lying on my bed, while I sat at my desk, trying to get used to him being there, and just being able to start studying again when he'd suddenly ask me something.

And Henry didn't ask me to go out this weekend. Normally he at least made the effort, but this time he'd given me my space. While I was grateful that I didn't have to take the time to, once again, explain to him that I was busy—that I had to study, had to get groceries, had to go to work, had to go to class, had to do laundry—it felt weird not having to fend him off like every other weekend.

But it did give me just a few precious minutes in which I could review one more page in preparation for this exam. And every minute counted when there was as much to do as I had to get done.

## Chapter 8

The canoers and kayakers who drifted down the river with their chests exposed skyward for a nice tan thought that the backwater, down-home town I lived in didn't have anything going for it, but I ran around a lot as a kid, sometimes literally. My adventurous friends and I always had something worthwhile to do in our small town along the James.

The town I grew up in was safe enough. All the neighbors were acres away, but mom and dad knew most of the locals. For the most part they trusted me to go out on my own by the age of five. I'd play next door at Jim's, then we'd run down to the river, jumping from the branches of my tree and swimming with our friend Danny from the other bank. His mom would make us all lunch, even for Violet. She was a girl, but she was consistently the first one up a tree or the last one to hold her breath under water. So we let her tag along.

Then came the days of the bike. That Christmas morning when I got my first bike was the most excited I'd ever been in my young life. It was the greatest invention ever made. I could bike down the road, across the bridge, and over to Danny's without ever having to get wet. Once we all had a set of two wheels to perch upon we could ride up to Mr. Fulson's roadside ice cream shop any day of the week. Getting to that ice cream shop was always a trick. We had to wait until after lunch, long enough that our parents didn't suspect we'd avoided cleaning our plates to save room for ice cream, but not so long that we'd be held back in case we spoiled our appetites for dinner. I figured out the pattern, and thanks to me we got to pull our bikes into the loose dirt parking lot almost every day of the summer. We'd each come with some of our allowance and ask for one two-scoop ice cream cone, please. Mr. Fulson always liked it when you said please.

He manned the shack all by himself, the wood slats always meticulously whitewashed and accented with pale blue trim. Every cone was served by a soft, wrinkled hand, with a napkin

and a crinkled smile that warned, “Make sure you lick both sides.” Violet always got a little more, which never seemed very fair. Once Danny complained, pestering Violet for some of her ice cream. When she finally let Danny take a lick, she shoved the whole thing in his face. Mr. Fulson laughed and gave her another cone. We left her alone after that, always finishing the trip with a long, downhill coast homeward. Kind old Mr. Fulson passed away when I was nine, and though the shack remained, run by the neighbors, the ice cream wasn’t the same. The loose dirt parking lot was churned up as ever, but the white slats had started to chip.

I was happy with the way things were. Jim, Danny, Violet, and I all had our ways to stay busy. Each of our families had enormous backyards which were perfect for improvised baseball or a quick game of soccer. The hills quickly climbed to the low mountains and it was always exciting when we got permission to hike up the slopes and play among the tall oaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains as grand explorers. On rainy days we played hide and seek in the dark, taking turns bugging our parents with our childish screams. But at least they knew, like we did, what was going to happen on any given day.

But we lived by a river that brought new faces every day. I remember the summer I’d turned eight; Henry had just turned four, so mom had finally allowed him to come down to the river with us. We’d just finished a splash fight in the shallows and were sitting with our backs against my tree, towels between us and the bark to prevent scratches. Then a group of three canoes came around the bend. The teenage passengers were singing loud; one was standing with a can in his hand and making the canoe list precariously from side to side. They were drunk – I’d seen it before from my Uncle Fred.

They came down the river, and one of them pointed in our direction, probably indicating my tree. Dozens of canoers stopped on our bank to use the tree. These noisy folk followed suit

and rowed their canoes up onto the rocks and dirt, exiting the boats with a little less grace than usual to pull them out of the current. The one who'd been standing in the boat holding the beer roughly pushed past me to get at the tree.

"Hey!" I said. "Go around."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did that hurt?"

I knew he didn't actually care. My four-year-old brother didn't and decided to say something. "Yeah, it did."

"Then get out of the way so the big kids can climb the tree."

Henry frowned. "But we were here first."

One of the other teenagers came up. "Now we're here. So bug off."

"No," I said. "We were here first. You can use the tree, but just watch out."

The beer boy released his hold on the tree. "You want us to watch out?" He squatted next to where I was sitting, and gave me a push.

"Hey!" I got up from where I'd been sitting and stood facing him.

"What're you going to do about it?" This time he shoved me. I fell over, but while the teenagers friend were all standing with him, my friends were still sitting. Violet's hands were clenched, Henry's eyes wide. But they were eight years old. I was eight years old, and these boys were twice my size.

I stood back up, and the mean one joked, "Oh, he's a big boy. Whatcha gonna do, big boy?"

The only thing I knew I should do was stand. After that, I didn't know what I'd do. I didn't think about it. What could I do? I looked at Henry and Violet and Danny and Jim. Violet started to stand.

I looked at the teenager and I don't know if he could see how afraid I was. I don't even know if he expected me to charge at him. But he reacted quickly enough, restraining my arms and throwing me in the river. The cool water was so sudden a sensation that I swallowed a whole mouthful. I came up gasping for air, seeing Violet trying to get at the boy who'd thrown me. I also saw my dad running down the hill. Before the teenagers knew he was there he'd punched the teenager square in the jaw, putting him on his back.

"Get the fuck out of here." My dad wasn't a particularly large man, but as he stood there with his shoulders hunched, his arms hanging ready to throw another punch, he looked hulking. I'd never seen him like this, his brow shadowed and his face clearly explaining to everyone there what he was prepared to do.

"I said get the fuck out!" He pushed the now kneeling teenager over to his friends and they all scrambled into the canoes and pushed off. My dad waded into the water to stand near me as he glared at the disappearing canoes. He bent down and lifted me so I was standing on my feet again. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, trembling from more than just the shock of water. Dad gave my shoulder a quick rub, then kissed my forehead. He climbed back out of the river to check on Henry and the others. I followed, but slowly. Henry was in dad's arms, crying. We all went back to the house.

My mom went next door with Jim to tell his parents what had happened. Danny's mom drove across the bridge to fetch him after dad called over to explain. Violet's parents weren't going to be home from work for a little while, so she stayed with us and watched TV.

"You were very brave," she said.

Thanks.

“I was only to stand up to them after you did.”

I shrugged.

We sat there for a while, just watching the television. Finally I found my voice. “Thanks for helping.”

When her parents finally did come, they had a long discussion with my parents about whether or not to let us go down to the river anymore. Dad said it was a one-time thing. Violet’s mom thought maybe someone should keep an eye on us while we were on the banks. My mom thought maybe we shouldn’t go down to the tree at all anymore.

I said goodbye to Violet and she left. But the discussion continued at home. Mom and dad talked about it through dinner, making sure Henry and I were okay. Henry bounced right back. I said I was fine.

They stopped talking about the drunk teenagers long enough for dad to come upstairs and tuck us into bed. Bedtime was a ritual for Henry and I. Dad would pull the covers up to our chins and then slip the blankets under our bodies so that we were wrapped tight in a cocoon. Then we’d wriggle free and hug good night. “Goodnight, Adam. I love you this much,” he’d say, and hug me close.

But I didn’t feel quite right when he tucked me in, and he noticed. “What’s the matter, Adam?”

I shrugged.

“Is today at the river still bugging you? Don’t worry about it. Nobody’s ever going to hurt you while I’m around.”

“But what if you’re not?” I asked.

Dad smiled. “I will try my hardest to always be there for you. But if I’m not, you’ll have to be strong, for Henry and mom. You were very strong today, and if that kid wasn’t such a big bully, you’d have scared him off, too.” He bent down and kissed my forehead again. “I love you this much.”

When he left my room, I rolled onto my side to fall asleep, trying to keep the day’s events from consuming my thoughts. Still I heard both dad’s and Violet’s words echoing in urgency: be strong; be brave; be able to stand by yourself. It was still a long time before I found sleep, as the discussion that had occupied most of the evening rose in volume and fervor.

## Chapter 9

The bookstore life was fairly representative of the products they sold: exciting and enticing on the outside, but long and tedious before anything of substance ever happened. My training was slow and filled with any number of register and keyboard entry combinations that were rattled off by the manager Tom to then rattle around in my brain until they came out of my fingers in the form of muscle memory. It wasn't a very intellectually stimulating job, but for that I was thankful.

I just needed something to take my mind off my law studies. I liked things simple, even when I had a lot to do. Knowing that I had to go to work, then go home and eat, then study for a few hours, then go to bed was all simple. It was a list of chores, much like my bookstore job.

But law was not so straightforward. One case ruling contradicted dozens of others and set precedent, but what was precedent when the law suggested something else? A man could be a murderer, or he could be a man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, all based on the way the evidence is presented. When I got into law I thought, no matter what the law said, I could protect the innocent and punish the guilty; help make the world a little more right and a little less wrong. I had to know then that it was probably a little naïve, but now I knew it for sure.

The world isn't split into black and white. It's not as easy to know and to not know, to question and not question. Everything is just a whole muddled mess, and despite my aversion to the complexity of my chosen future, I was making the necessary adjustments. I had to make adjustments or life would walk all over me. I had to be able to stand by myself.

My tasks at the bookstore started behind the front counter, ringing up book sales and smiling incessantly as customers filed in and out of the wooden double door entrance. Hello,



how are you? They were always good or doing well, and I was always fine. I sure got good at the skill set that is customer service small talk.

If I thought I'd get away from that when I was moved onto the floor to field questions and stock shelves, I had been fooling myself. Now my only job was to engage in quaint conversations concerning book genres and frequented authors. I could speak about Stephanie Meyer with the tweens and about Jonathan Franzen with the bespectacled retirees. Any sort of requests for recommendations I referred to Frank, the resident recommender. I'd suggest any of the other employees because I surely hadn't read anything current in at least four years.

Of course, working in the store definitely expanded the list of books that I wanted to read when I finally had the time. It was exponential growth as I showed a gentleman to the history section, a middle-aged professor to the literary classics collection, a young child to her first chapter book, or informed the college freshman—with appropriate dismay—that we didn't carry the required reading for a particular class. So many requests for titles came through my neck of the store that within only a few months I could spew the exact prices of certain popular texts and locate others without even a moment's hesitation searching on the shelf. And so many people approached with their needs that I learned who I should or should not ask, "Can I help you?"

In early December people started coming into the store, not necessarily to purchase anything, but merely to step out of the brutal Central Ohio wintry weather and warm up. Maybe they'd find a potential Christmas gift, but for the most part I had become another fixture of the store without much else to do than stand there and look pretty. Rather than play the statue at the help desk I took to meandering through the aisles, hands clasped behind my back and a friendly smile on my lips in case anyone had questions. For the most part they did no more than nod in my direction in acknowledgement of the nametag slung around my neck, so I let them be.

Every once in a while I broke my silence, but usually only to address a particularly attractive woman. The sheer volume of customers ensured that at least once per shift I had the opportunity to speak with a female of flattering features and approximate same age as I. Whether or not such opportunities became distinct pleasures was a gamble. There were times when I enjoyed the turn of conversation, other instances when the only interesting thing about my temporary conversation partner was the allure of her figure. But they were all one dimensional encounters, once again so very much like the jackets of the books around me. The customers who I saw, spoke with, and bid adieu often amounted to little better an experience than placing Ms. Monroe, Ms. Lewinsky, or the nameless erotica model on the displays around the store. And still I approached friendly faces, in the hope that they may be more than an overly glossy ideal, with a smile and a “Can I help you?”

When the young woman with wavy dark blonde hair and knit cap turned to respond to my address I noted her green eyes behind black-rimmed glasses that had slipped ever so slightly down her soft, straight-edged nose. She returned my friendly smile and said, “Yes. Actually I could use your help. I’m looking for a book.”

I chuckled. “Well, we have a lot of books. Are you looking for one in particular?”

She let go a breath of laughter at her mistake before flicking her hair from her face to say, “Yeah, of course that’s what I meant. I’m looking for a novel by Claire North.”

I didn’t know Claire North. I hadn’t heard of her books before. “Well, let’s take a look in the computer, shall we?”

“Lead the way,” she played along.

I turned to lead us both back to the help desk. I ran my hand along the counter top as I turned the corner to stand behind my computer. My lovely companion stood facing me, gloved hands adjusting her slung purse. “You said Claire North? Do you know the title?”

She shook her head. “Unfortunately I do not. Actually surprised I even remembered the author.”

“Well, without one or the other things might have gotten a little difficult.”

“Ah, I’m sure you could have figured something out,” she said with a flick of her hand.

I tilted my head to one side as I tapped ‘Claire North’ into my software search box. “I don’t know about that. I swore off reading minds a long time ago.”

“Did you now?” She leaned back in astonishment. “You must be one of a kind if you can read minds.”

I looked at her with my eyebrows raised. “There are more of us than you might think.”

She nodded, looking off to one side and chewing the corner of her mouth in thought.

“That is very true. You see,” she leaned over the counter. “I can read minds, too.”

“And? What am I thinking?”

“That you have my book in stock?”

I glanced at the computer screen. “Nope. We won’t be getting the new book by Claire North for at least a couple days still.”

“Darn,” she said. “Definitely thought I could read minds.”

“Maybe you can keep trying while you wait for this book.”

She asked, “And when would that be?”

I sighed and put my hands on either side of the computer. “Unfortunately I don’t have a specific date. I just know we have it on order.”

“Would I be able to call you so I don’t have to keep going out into this awful weather?”

“Sure,” I nodded. “You could do that.” Releasing the computer and reaching under the desk counter I grabbed a scrap piece of paper. It wasn’t until then that I’d really heard what she said. She’d said “you.” And whether she’d intended to say it or not, I grabbed a pen and started writing, explaining as I went, “This number is for the front registers, this one is for the help desk here...”

Then I looked up and handed her the paper. “And the last number is my personal number in case you have any other questions.”

She laughed and took the paper. She must have glanced at my nametag because she then said, “Well thank you very much, Adam. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Anytime, miss...”

“My name’s Jessica,” she offered.

“A pleasure to meet you, Jessica.”

Jessica nodded. “You too.” She readjusted her purse strap again. “Well, thanks again.”

“Not a problem. You have a nice day.”

“You too.”

As she walked towards the front of the store I turned in my best attempt at nonchalance, only to see Frank at the other computer. He didn’t look at me, but the smile on his face and the shaking of his head told me exactly what he was thinking.

## Chapter 10

“So,” Henry lured. “Tell us about her.”

I shook my head in amusement. Henry and Orey sat on the couch perpendicular to me, all of us watching the live broadcast of The Ohio State Buckeyes men’s basketball team in an impressive game against Michigan State. I’d come home from work and flopped into my armchair. Henry had asked how my day had been, unless of course I was too tired to talk; it had been almost a week since our last real conversation. As a matter of fact, I’d told him, I do have a story. So I met this girl.

“She was really cute,” I said. “She had a kinda fashionable hipster way of dressing. Really nice eyes.”

Orey bobbed his head. “Yeah, get some.”

“All I did was give her my number.”

“But in a baller way!” Orey said.

Henry and I had to laugh at that. “That was pretty smooth,” Henry admitted. “Especially coming from you.”

I watched my fingernails run under one another as I said, “I have my moments.”

“Maybe. Guess I just always manage to miss them.”

“Well,” I said. “Then it’s a good thing I told you about this one.”

Henry was smiling when I looked up from my hands. “I guess so.”

We watched the television screen for a time, the back and forth of the basketball game as the teams ran from one end of the court to the other. It was a rapid-fire type of game, and even though each team got its chance in the key, only the Bucks seemed to keep scoring.

Henry returned to our conversation at commercial. “So did she call you?”

I snorted. “I only met her a few hours ago.” I groaned as I got from my armchair to wander into the kitchen to look for something to eat. “And besides, who calls anymore?”

“I still call people,” Henry said.

I opened the freezer, disappointed to realize I’d already depleted my frozen pizza reserves. I opened the fridge, hoping I’d find something worthwhile for dinner, and found the top shelf dominated by cartons of eggs. “Do either of you guys know whose eggs these are? How long have they been in here?”

Orey didn’t even look my way. “I labeled mine.”

“I’ve got one carton,” Henry said.

“Then why do we have five dozen eggs?” I asked. “I know they’re not mine.”

“Then go ahead and eat them,” Henry suggested.

“They’re probably bad. They’ve been in here for a while.”

“Just because no one’s touched them for a while doesn’t mean they’re bad,” Henry pointed out.

I made a face, but I was hungry so I made eggs, despite my trepidation. Surprisingly the eggs hadn’t gone bad. With toast and some sliced apple I had a simple dinner in the living room, alongside Henry and Orey as we sat and watched the Bucks win the game. I set aside my plate and stretched my arms over and behind my head, lacing my fingers and resting my head on them with a heavy sigh.

“You doing all right over there?” Henry asked with a laugh.

“I’m just very comfortable right now, and I don’t want to go study.”

“Those eggs taste good?”

I shifted adjusted my position in the armchair. “Yes.”

“Told you so.”

“You just think you’re so clever,” I said as I righted myself in the chair.

Henry shrugged. “That’s because I am.” A snort came from the other end of the couch.

Henry turned to look at Orey.

“Sorry,” Orey said. “I’m sorry.”

“See? Even Orey thinks you’re full of it.” I chuckled along with my roommates.

“Okay, okay,” Henry calmed. “If I’m so full of it, then I neither of you would be opposed to a little wager.”

“Depends on the bet,” I said.

“I’ll bet you that that girl you met texts you by the end of tonight.”

Air escaped my lips in amusement before I even thought about it. “No way.”

“No, I’m betting you she will.”

Orey joined me. “I don’t think she will.”

“If things happened the way you said they did,” Henry said. “Then she’ll text you tonight.”

All I could do was shake my head. “There’s no way she’s going to text me.”

“Then you won’t mind betting me.” Henry attempted to waggle his eyebrows at me.

“You know you can’t actually do that, right?”

He flicked his hand as if to bat away my words. “Come on. Let’s bet on it.”

Orey beat me to the punch. “Fine, I’ll take that bet. I say she doesn’t text him. Five bucks.” He and Henry shook hands.

Then Henry turned to me. “What d’ya say?”

If I was being truly honest with myself, I wanted her to text me. But to think that I would be lucky enough to have another conversation with some random girl whose name I didn’t even

know, and to whom I gave my number on a whim after only a few short minutes, was nigh impossible. So I offered my hand to my brother. “Five bucks says she doesn’t text or call.”

Henry nodded as he took my hand in his warmer, slightly clammy hand. “Five bucks and a call home if she does.”

I grinned at my brother. If anyone ever asked me to describe my brother in one word I’d have remember “persistent.” But I agreed.

So when my phone vibrated later that evening with an unknown number, I unlocked the smartphone screen to reveal a message from Jessica. I bounced the phone in my hand, indignant in my loss, but smiling from disbelief. Henry had already reclined on the couch in victory.

“You can pay up by the end of the week,” he said.



## Chapter 11

My first kiss was going to be with Violet, I was sure of it.

We'd grown up together, and through all the injuries from roughhousing, stubborn shouting matches during pickup sports, and long winters stuck at school we were friends. Of course, when we were younger I never thought about her like that. Not when she was more likely to punch you in the face than give you a smooch.

But after the incident down by the river everything seemed to heat up around me. Pleasant tickles of what I suppose were the flames of infatuation started to find their way to me. By the time I entered my second decade of life I no longer excluded girls just because they couldn't keep up with the guys. Maybe it wasn't so much that I liked them, but Jim, Danny, and I no longer wanted them to keep up – we would slow down for them.

And while my friends and I were slowing down, my family was speeding up. Dad and mom often discussed things at long length. Everything they disagreed on was picked at, delicately at first, and then with more agitation like it was a frustrating stray hair that not even tweezers could yank out in oddly vindictive satisfaction. They always seemed to come to an understanding, the first of which was that Henry and I could still visit the river, but that I was to promise we'd come straight home if anyone bothered us again. I did make that promise and I often made use of it when the mutual accords my parents would eventually reach seemed several hours off and the arguments they insisted were discussions heated. But they didn't yell. They never yelled.

But the weather and school requirements weren't always great for going down to the river to sit beneath the outstretched arms of my tree and cool beneath the shade. So when I needed to do homework I hung out with Violet. She was the best option for a study buddy. Jim and I got

sidetracked too often, and Danny wasn't in many of my classes. Middle school had separated the inseparable best friends with only Violet and I still able to work together on homework.

She was stubborn to say the least. Her answers were right and mine were wrong, and she'd frequently lean over the table from her spot kneeling on a kitchen chair to point out how wrong I was. Except for when I wasn't. Then she'd quietly rock back to her own paper, chewing on her pencil. Then she'd erase her mistake in the math and redo the problem until she got the right answer herself. But it worked, on the homework and on me. She could stand by herself, she could be brave. The shock of the water when my body hit the river and the pain in my throat and lungs as I suddenly swallowed water never left me. Neither did my dad's words to stay strong. I could do it.

One evening my dad came in to bid me goodnight. I'd grown old enough that I no longer wanted him to tuck me into bed, but that night he did it anyways, despite my protestations of, "Stop it, dad!"

He just kept his gaze intent on the covers, making sure I was all bundled up and unable to move. When he got to my feet and had finished rocking them back and forth to get the blankets nice and folded underneath, he sat at the foot of my bed and patted my leg. "I know you don't like it much anymore, but I miss buggin' you."

I told him about Violet. I'd knew that it was something to "like" like someone. I knew what it was, and I was pretty sure I liked Violet that way. My dad licked his lips and looked at the ceiling. He told me to let him think for a moment.

Then he scooted forward so he was nearer to me and he set his hands on either side of my shoulders so we could look at each other, man to man. "When you like someone, it means you should never hurt them."

“But I would never hurt Violet. She’s my friend.”

“Good. Then you should also be sure to be straight with them. You gotta let them know how you feel, because then you can do what’s best to make sure you don’t hurt them. Got it?”

I nodded. I think I understood what he was talking about. But, “I don’t know if I want to tell Violet I like her.”

“You don’t have to,” dad said. “Sometimes it’s better to wait. Sometimes you have to be strong and just do it. But I think it’s better to wait now, figure everything out. Then you can decide.”

Again, I nodded. I could do that. “I love you, dad.”

“And you know I love you, too.” He gave me a hug, and I wiggled my arms free from the blankets to wrap my arms around his neck and give a squeeze. “I love you this much.”

The next day my mom told Henry and I that she and dad had decided it would be best if he left. Besides the monthly postcards, I never heard from him again.

After that I rarely saw Violet. First because I spent hours sitting under my tree alone, and then with Henry. Then because I got an afterschool job repairing nets at the local orchard to keep birds from pecking at the fruit. I twisted twist ties across all the holes in the nets until my fingers were rubbed raw and I couldn’t feel my fingertips. At thirteen my second job was at the grocer’s to make coming by money easier for Henry and mom. At eighteen I graduated high school and Violet was dating Jim.

## Chapter 12

I stood with my hands in my pockets. I rocked back and forth, from heel to toe, and bounced in place as I waited, and took my hands out of my pockets and crossed them in front of me and waited for Jessica to arrive.

Henry had been too right about her. How he'd known she would contact me was a mystery, but there I stood waiting, anxious as I've ever been. I'd been with plenty of girls in college, but this was honestly the first girl I'd ever tried to get to know by sitting down and talking first. Undergraduate college was fast and fun; the rest of my life kept me from sitting down for coffee. I figured I could sit when I reached my destination. But Henry insisted I pause for a moment.

"When are you ever going to get a chance like this again?" he said.

I opened my hands and raised my eyebrows. "Henry, there are literally thousands of eligible women."

"And you think you'll be able to pull a stunt like this again?" Henry shrugged and tossed me my phone. He had been helping me strike up a conversation, but he said, "Good luck with that."

"Okay, what do you suggest?"

Henry hit me in the shoulder. "Ask her out for coffee."

So inside the Cup O' Joe coffee shop near the bookstore was where I met Jessica again. She'd foregone her black-rimmed glasses this time, but she still wore her beige knit cap over her dark blonde hair. This time she'd added slight curls to the ends of her locks and had wrapped a matching knit scarf around her neck. She looked around the shop, searching for a moment before she found me and hurried over, the tip of her nose tinted red from the biting cold outside.

“Hi!” she breathed as she came over to my table.

I reached out my hand and she shook it, her hands slightly rough. “Glad you could come. Hope this wasn’t too much out of your way.”

“No, no. This is fine.” She took off her hat and unwound the scarf from her neck, stuffing them into the sleeve of her coat and draping the bunch over the back of her chair. “Have you ordered anything?”

“Nope. I was just waiting for you.” We ordered. I got the house blend, two creams and one sugar. She took hers black. I said, “Well, I certainly respect that.”

“What?” she asked.

I put my hands out to say, “Taking your coffee black. That’s a little bitter for my taste.”

Jessica scratched her head. “I think I just drink it too much. I love the taste now.” She went to cross her legs, but kicked the underside of the table in the process.

I laughed. “Good thing we didn’t have our drinks yet.”

She just put her fingers to her brow and closed her eyes. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m just flustered and... oh gosh. Okay.” She took a deep breath. “Hi.”

I chuckled. “Hello.”

“My name’s Jessica.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Jessica. I’m Adam.”

“Why, hello.” She smiled, and I returned the expression.

I placed my hands flat on the table and leaned forward a bit. “I don’t know why you’re flustered. I was surprised you even texted me.”

“Well, yeah,” Jessica licked her lips. “I figured you’d taken a chance, and a very smooth one at that, so why not? Why not coffee?”

“Because your feet might kick it off the table.”

Her head tilted back to release her anxiety through laughter, a short sound, but pleasing nevertheless. “Yes. I figured that coffee might be good if my abnormally large feet didn’t get in the way.”

The waiter brought us our coffee and I placed my hand on the saucer, poised for when the liquid might cool, and also to steady my hand.

Earlier in the week when I’d come home from work to sit on the couch and watch television with my brother was the first real conversation that I’d had with him in weeks. It was the first time I’d just lounged, but Henry hadn’t lost a beat. He’d started harping on me again about working too hard and convincing me to meet with this girl Jessica. But now that he’d convinced me, I realized I’d have to thank him.

Jessica sat opposite me with her legs safely crossed and her large feet away from the table. She was stirring the coffee with a spoon to cool it down, looking into the swirling pattern as I looked at her, listening to her talk about her fifth year of undergraduate study at OSU where she was finishing her degree in chemistry.

“My brother’s studying chemistry at OSU,” I said, taking a moment to test the heat of my own coffee.

“Oh really? What year is he?”

The coffee was too hot. “He’s only a sophomore. Henry Cistrzyn. You probably wouldn’t know him.”

Jessica took a small sip from her cup. “No, sorry. But that must be nice, your brother going to the same college as you.”

I pressed my lips together. “I’m kind of lucky that he does. He told me to stop worrying and just ask you out for coffee.”

“Smart guy,” she joked.

I raised my cup to my lips, blew and sipped, preparing myself for when I stopped. As soon as the cup left my mouth I’d have to hold an extended conversation, because this was indeed one of those moments when an encounter was starting to turn into a distinct pleasure.

## Chapter 13

As loud as the arguments had been and as frequent as my voice wanted to shout along with the memories, I grew quiet after dad left. He had agreed with mom that it would be best if he left. They had come to yet another understanding and now I was alone under my tree, exposed and fragile, small and easily shoved into the icy waters lapping along the riverbank.

He'd told me to be strong. For mom and for Henry. But how was I supposed to be strong for myself? I didn't want to stand alone. I didn't want to stand or speak for anyone when I obviously couldn't understand two of the only people who I thought understood me.

Violet, Danny, and Jim came down the hill from my house, walking their bikes with two hands on the handlebars and steps much too light for the gravity surrounding me. They asked if I wanted to go for a bike ride. I said no.

No?

No. I don't want to right now. I'll talk to you guys later.

They left as quickly as they'd come, but when they left I think they started to realize that they couldn't pick their feet up quite as easily. I certainly couldn't pick myself up from the spot I'd molded into the loamy earth between the roots of my tree.

My tree. The pride of my young life, and the only place that still felt like any semblance of certainty. I'd worked hard to make sure that everyone knew this tree was mine, and ever since it had stood tall to watch over me.

Or was it looming? Had my tree become something more sinister, luring in the unwanted and unholy, everything that tainted my unimpressed mind? I never thought a bunch of drunks could make the river I'd played in feel so cold, nor did I ever consider that a man who hugged



me close at night could stand a hulking mass on the edge of a meandering river, shadowed by the shade that kept us comfortable.

No, I refused to believe that the light had grown darker beneath my tree's canopy. Rough the bark may be, but I'd worked too hard and been too happy to name this tree Adam's Tree. And sitting there on the riverbank, despite the shuddering moments that lingered as a dampness in the soil, I was calmed by the river. The river never worried if it dried or became bloated with rainfall, it just kept moving forward towards the ocean. A long journey it would be, but eventually this flowing would become a swelling, raising and lowering the vast expanse of blue horizon until it all just flattened in the distance in unknowable serenity.

It was the only way I could think to not fall into despair at the loss of my father. I had to follow the river in its meditation, move myself forward until my efforts, everything I've seen that hurts and helps me, becomes just a linear line of satisfying moments in the future.

Isn't that what I did with my tree? I knew what I wanted to accomplish, and I made sure that I got there, no matter the obstacles. And I was satisfied, even for a childish, fleeting time. I could be strong for satisfaction, for my own peace since apparently I didn't flow with my parents.

And that's why I got my young jobs. I was helping mom and Henry so we could all make it to the ocean, so I maybe I would finally see dad's sail out on the horizon. But I couldn't tell them where we were going, because rivers don't speak.

## Chapter 14

By the time I'd returned home, Jessica and I had both finished our coffee and agreed to meet for dinner that weekend. I came through the front door of my house with a little turn in my step, halfway between dancing and sliding on the floor. I hung up the keys on the rack near the door and kicked the door shut. Henry was sitting on the couch, not at all trying to suppress a grin.

"So it went well?" he inquired.

I dropped my hands from their dance-ready position. "Yeah, I guess so."

Henry visibly rolled his eyes. "Come on, Adam. You gotta tell me what happened."

I wanted to smile. I wanted to tell him everything about meeting Jessica and sitting down to just chat with her. I hadn't done it in so long that I wasn't sure where my words were coming from. We'd spent over an hour sitting at a tiny, circular table in a coffee shop, simply talking after finishing our coffee in the first twenty minutes. And it had felt like a release, the floodgates opening and the sentences just pouring out.

"Why do you want to know?" I asked.

"Why do you always ask me that? I'm your brother. Why wouldn't I want to know?"

"Because I'm always so busy."

"Some days you're not," Henry said.

I slipped off my shoes and came to collapse on the couch next to Henry. I draped one arm over the back of the cushions. "How'd you know she'd text back?"

Henry stared at me, raising one eyebrow and drawing his head back until he finally said, "I didn't. I just guessed."

"Well you guessed right."

He put up his hands. "Look, I know you haven't had much luck with the ladies..."

“I’ve had plenty of luck.”

Henry rolled his eyes. “Anyways, I thought you could use a confidence boost. Besides, it’s about time you take a break. You’ve been working hard for way too long.”

“I have to if I want to get through law school.”

Again, Henry turned his gaze upon me. “You know that’s not what I meant. Just get out of your room for once and realize there’s more than making sure you’ve got a job for loans, or whatever else it may be.”

I moved my arm down from its elevated position to sit with my arms in my lap. I took a breath, letting it fill my lungs and diaphragm, then releasing it in a wall of sighing sound. “I had fun with Jessica. I’m glad you got me to go talk with her.”

I left my brother sitting on the couch as I made my way up to my room. Closing the door I looked around my room and saw all my notebooks still open to the place where I’d last left them. They were there, waiting for me, less like a door to the future and more like a figure in the dark. I turned from my desk and flopped onto my bed.

I’d learned a lot during my college career, from law, to chugging beer properly, to sneaking into the North Campus dining hall for a free meal. But Henry’s prediction about Jessica, despite his claim to the contrary, had me thinking that maybe he hadn’t entirely guessed. There was a drive in him to bug me at all times of all days because somehow he could grasp at least some of the invisible threads of human connection.

Henry’s stubbornness rivaled that of my own, in a surprising manner. He kept trying to get me to join him in spontaneous moments, to hop in his car and drive. He didn’t care where he ended up, just so long as he could get me to ride along for a day or an hour – he was trying to take me along, too.

Maybe somewhere along the line the river had inspired him, too. From the moment he was old enough to join me, Henry had embraced my spot like it was his own. And when I got busy with school and work I'd find him down there some days, reclining in the fork of the tree branches by himself. That tree had been on our property, and I'd been right to think that it belonged to someone in my family. But in its lifetime it must have grown tall enough to hold my brother, too.

So I guess I never thought I'd be standing downstairs again, facing Henry with a five-dollar bill in one hand and my phone in the other, admitting to myself that he was right, once again, and that it should have been much sooner than this that I pay up.

"Here's the five dollars," I said, handing the money to my brother. Then I dialed a number and put the phone to my ear. "And here goes nothing."

Henry seemed to fade into the background as I heard the phone ring. The emptiness between the trills of digital tone was what made my stomach twist, because only then did I know that I'd been too quiet. Sometimes strong isn't standing alone.

"Hi, mom."

## **Part 2**

### **Hello, Father**

## Chapter 15

Jessica ran from under the cover of her apartment building's eaves to open my car door and throw herself into the passenger seat, safe from the rain. She swiped a stray lock of hair behind her ear and clutched her handbag in her lap. Then she turned to me and sighed, "Phew. Made it."

"Glad you did." I leaned over and kissed her. It had been over four years since we first met in the bookstore off Ohio State's campus, and Jessica looked lovely as always.

When I remarked upon her appearance she said, "Why, thank you. You don't look too shabby yourself."

I cast a glance down at my blue oxford shirt and blue blazer. They didn't look worn, but I'd in fact been wearing them all day. To make the outfit more appropriate for the evening I'd left my tie in the trunk. Jessica didn't need to know I'd been working overtime again. She only needed to hear what had come of it. So I thanked her, instead. Then we drove off into the rain, the windshield wipers rocking back and forth across my vision, barely making a dent in the wall of water in front of me.

"Wow," I said. "It's really coming down out there."

"We don't have to go out," Jessica offered.

"No, it's okay." I placed one hand on her thigh, just to give her a reassuring squeeze. "I want to celebrate tonight."

So we drove on, oblivious to the rain around us save for the pattering that echoed dimly in the background. When I stopped at a red light, I looked at Jessica and smiled at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

She squinted at me, trying to see me more clearly through half-closed eyes. “Then why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Because I want to. Can I not look at you?”

“Not when the light’s green,” Jessica said, causing me to turn my head back to the road.

We arrived at the modern Italian restaurant I’d chosen for the night’s meal, taking the valet parking option due to the incessant downpour. The valet opened Jessica’s door and she ducked into the restaurant. After handing over my car keys, I joined her, more than pleased I’d chosen this venue. It was definitely the atmosphere for good news.

A week ago when I’d put in the reservation, this dinner had been nothing more than a chance for Jessica and me to get away from our apartments and for me to get away from my job. But now, after the long hours working in the office, I finally had something to show for it. I wanted to dine in style, and modern Italian fit the bill.

The restaurant featured a central bar at the front of the space, glowing modern white with matching high tables around the front windows. Customers milled around the bar in dresses and button-down shirts, sat at the tables atop backed pub chairs, and the hostess led us past glass cases of wine, stacked floor to ceiling and illuminated from within their white racks. Our table was placed towards the back of the restaurant, away from the more modern style and lively noise, and under traditional dim lighting among many other hushed, but energetic, couples and groups, in a similar atmospheric manner as that of bookstores and libraries – an innate response for what the space represented.

Jessica ordered the veal milanese while I enjoyed the lamb pappardelle. We sat across from each other, working our way through each bite, until finally the plates were clean. That’s when I folded my hands in front of me and said, “So, you know I’ve been working a lot.”

“Yes,” she said, dabbing away the last remnant of food from her lips. “And you know I’ve been telling you been working too much. It’s a law office with a dozen attorneys. You don’t need to do it all.”

“Yes, well,” I nodded my assent, but paused to get my words right. “All the extra work has paid off. I’m being promoted after the Dryden-Makgregor case.”

“That’s great, Adam!” Jessica folded her napkin onto the table and took my hand. “I’m very happy for you.”

I passed my thumb over her knuckles a couple times before I continued, “You might be even happier to hear that that the promotion is to non-equity partner.”

She barely managed to stifle a burst of laughter, letting out her excitement instead by saying, “Oh my God, Adam. Partner, already?”

“Well, it’s only non-equity partner,” I explained. “It’s kind of like the grooming track for firm partner, but yeah. Partner, already.”

Jessica motioned me closer, and across the table she pressed her lips to mine. “I’m so happy for you. That’s absolutely fantastic.”

“I still have a lot of work ahead of me, but,” I said, retaking my seat. “I’m very excited. I’ve been waiting to tell you all night.”

“Apparently!” she burst. “Gosh, the waiter almost took away our plates before you decided to drop that on the table.”

“I just wanted to make sure I didn’t make a mess and have our dishes go flying when I dropped it,” I joked.

Jessica just shook her head. “Oh wow. I’m sure that’s exactly why you waited.”



We left shortly thereafter, deciding to skip dessert and head home while the weather was in a lull. Jessica put her hand on the back of my neck once or twice on the drive back to her place, running her hands briefly through my hair before replacing her hand in her lap. She'd stare out the window, then glance over at me. I couldn't keep from grinning at her.

“What?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but had to shake her head to clear her thoughts. “I just can't believe you. Top of the food chain after three years. I just can't keep up with someone as rich and famous as you.”

I pulled into a spot on the street outside her apartment building and parked the car. “The only way I could keep up with you was by becoming rich and famous.”

“Oh, I'm sure,” she said. “Well, now that you are on top, you still going to have time for little old me?”

I bit the side of my lip, one arm resting on the steering wheel. “Well,” I said, making a show of thinking about her question. “I've got time now.”

Jessica rolled her eyes, a movement that, coming from her, seemed significantly less sarcastic and much more endearing. “Well, I guess that's a start,” she said.

## Chapter 16

“I tried.”

“Come on Adam, it was mom’s birthday. You couldn’t get off work for one day?”

I swallowed the food in my mouth and said, “I called her, at least.”

“And she really enjoyed that,” Henry acknowledged. “Just think how much more she would’ve enjoyed it if you actually came home for the birthday party.”

“I told you, Henry, I tried.” I was getting frustrated with him.

“What was so important that you missed mom’s birthday?”

“We were trying to close the Dryden-Makgregor merger. You know that one that’ll get me a promotion? I stayed on so that we could finish the project.”

“And did you finish it?”

“No, but we’re meeting again tonight to...”

“Oh come on.” Henry leaned back in his chair. “You’ve been saying that for months. ‘Not yet,’ or ‘Almost, just one or two more meetings.’ How long are they going to string you along before this promotion?”

I sighed and turned to look out the window. We were at lunch. The street outside was fairly busy, cars pulling in and out of spots along the sidewalk. I watched them instead of Henry because I didn’t have an answer to his question. “I don’t know.”

After celebrating with Jessica and telling her about the impending promotion, I thought my days of working until the security system had been engaged by the night staff were over. But here was yet another thing my job had deprived me of – I had missed my mother’s sixtieth birthday celebration, and I hadn’t even tried that hard to be there. We could have worked on the merger tonight. The companies weren’t all that enthusiastic about the deal anyways.

Returning from my dazed viewing of the street outside, I asked Henry, “How was the party?”

He shrugged slightly. “It went well, besides the fact that you weren’t there. About fifteen of our relatives showed up.”

“Well that’s good, then.” There was a pause. Both of us listened to the clanking and shouting coming from the diner kitchen. “You ready?”

Henry nodded. I left the tip on the table and then followed my brother outside into the late September air. I liked this part of the city. It reminded me of the small towns from the fifties with all the brick buildings and the company names painted on the front windows. We walked south down High Street to my car. A light breeze ruffled my black jacket, but I didn’t zip it up. Leaves on the trees along the street had begun to change color.

We got into my used Volvo and started the drive back to Henry’s apartment. We sat quietly for a few blocks before Henry said, “Hey! Did I tell you I brought Mary to meet mom?”

“No. What happened?”

“I introduced Mary and the first thing mom says is, ‘Are you sure you’ve got the right Henry? You’re much too beautiful to be dating my son.’”

I laughed whole-heartedly at this. It seemed an innate skill that moms possessed to be able to embarrass their children. “So I take it she liked her?”

“Oh she loved her! Mom and Mary talked all night.”

“Good!” It was about time Henry brought someone home to mom. There had been a handful of women throughout college—some of them relatively hopeful prospects—but none of them had amounted to anything. Most of them had been girls he met at parties and said goodbye

to a few weeks later, repeats of a similar story in which Henry had thought he'd found someone he could really talk to and enjoyed being around, but he'd been overly optimistic.

I asked him, "How long have you two been together?" Ever since I'd graduated law school I'd seen less and less of Henry. We no longer lived together, and I got my job. Then he graduated and got a position in a rather prominent chemical company's home office in Powell. Phone calls were brief check-ins, so I was a little deprived of his endless stories concerning his life.

Henry answered immediately, "We're going on six months."

"Geez! Already? So I guess things are fairly serious then?"

"Yeah, I guess," Henry said. "I enjoy talking to her. She's very into music, and she loves to read. We can have a real conversation, you know?" Then he added, "And she's hot."

I chuckled. "I'd have to agree with you on that one. I'd bang her."

"If you weren't dating Jessica, you mean?" Henry asked with a smirk.

"No way. I'd have Jessica join in." Henry punched me in the shoulder. "Hey! I'm driving."

Henry chuckled. "Well maybe you can convince the two of them next week. I want you and Jessica to come out to dinner with Mary and me."

I turned the wheel, pulling into the parking garage beneath Henry's apartment complex. I was not a fan of double dates. But it was Henry after all. "When next week?"

"How about Thursday evening at Bistro 24?"

I parked the car and sat for a moment. I tried to think of what I had going on that day. "I've got litigation that day. I won't be able to make it until 8 o' clock. Is that okay?"

"Perfect!" Henry said with a quick bob of his head. "I'll make the reservations then."

We got out of the car and walked to the elevators. I pressed the lock button on my remote, the beep of the car echoing amongst the concrete pillars of the garage. We took the elevator up to the fourth floor, where I was once again impressed by Henry's apartment building. Even the hallway was nice. The soft beige carpet still showed the lines of a vacuum cleaner's path, the lighting made the wooden doors look warm. I was lucky if the lights even worked in my apartment hallway.

Henry opened his door and tossed his keys into the room, landing them on the coffee table. I walked inside and closed the door behind me. The beige carpet extended into the apartment. The walls were clean and white, but unadorned. I took a seat on the couch, falling back onto the deep and comfortable leather cushions. It was so unlike my cloth couch with all its random lumps from the thrift store. The room was very inviting, something that I hoped I would have in the near future. Just as soon as the Dryden-Makgregor merger was finished.

I picked the remote off the cushion next to me and turned on the television. It was a large flat screen residing on a low cabinet. "Why don't you mount this TV?" I asked Henry. I could see he was in the kitchen, rummaging in the fridge.

"I don't know. Just never cared about it. Want a beer?" he asked, poking his head over the fridge door.

"No thanks," I replied. "But you've got so much white space behind the TV. There's nothing on your walls."

Henry flopped onto the couch next to me, foregoing the nearby armchair. "Eh, doesn't bother me." He took a sip of his beer.

The local news was on, neither of us really paying attention but watching anyways. I looked around his apartment again. I really, really wanted this place. “How can you afford to live here?”

Henry drew his eyebrows together in confusion. “Same way you would. I work.”

I shook my head. “But you make less than I do and you have a nicer place. Don’t you save anything?”

“Yeah, I save. But you have to spend every once in a while, or else what’s the point of having money?”

“So that you can save it for when you get married, or have kids. Or when you have a rainy day.”

“I use that television every time it rains.” Henry swallowed some more of his beer.

I shook my head. “Okay, then if you’re going to risk you’re financial security, why not get one of those new ultraHD TVs? Why not mount it?”

“I’m not risking my financial security,” Henry countered. “But think about it this way. Would you ever come over here if my place was as much a dump as yours?”

“Of course I would!” I said. “You’re my brother.”

Henry turned his head in my direction, a smug grin on his face. “Really?”

This was the first time I’d come over in a least two weeks. “Maybe a little less often...” I said defensively.

“I get the best of both worlds,” Henry explained. “People come over and enjoy themselves, and I’m living comfortably. And I still have money saved in the bank. It’s possible to have it all.”

No it wasn't. I'd been living as if I still were in college ever since graduation, waiting until that time when my future was taken care of. I was just getting to the point where I was considering getting a new place, and my upcoming promotion would be the final peg to climb.

I decided to let the argument go. "If you say so." Then I put my hands on my knees and stood with a grunt. "I'm gonna to get going. Still have that merger meeting tonight."

Henry set his beer on the table and stood. "All right, man." He gave me a hug. "I'll see you next week, right?"

I nodded, "Yep." I turned to leave, but Henry stopped me.

"Hey, Adam. Go see mom, okay? She misses you."

"Will do." I turned the doorknob and left for my own apartment.

My living space was a dingy little place. The appliances were old, the shower floor stained. The walls had been patched with plaster several times so that odd lumps stuck out at random intervals. At least the landlord had given everything a fresh coat of paint. Maybe that was the only comparison I could draw between my apartment and Henry's: we both had white walls.

I sat down at my creaking kitchen table and started to sift through the various stacks of files and papers on it. A small space remained open directly in front of my seat. This was where I ate my breakfast.

I found the papers I was looking for and placed them in my briefcase. Then I sat there on my folding chair for a moment, looking around my kitchen. The linoleum made a sticky sound as it clung to the bottom of every step. The cabinets were dinged, dirty dishes sat in the sink. It was almost time to get out of here. Almost. Putting up with this apartment was about to pay off after the Dryden-Makgregor merger. I would finally have enough saved and a promotion to keep

things that way. I could take Jessica out to Bistro 24 more regularly. I could get an apartment worth visiting.

Yes, soon I could start expecting a little more from life. But until then, I still had to go close the merger. I switched my black zip-up for a sports coat, grabbed my briefcase, and quickly left the apartment.



## Chapter 17

I called my mom a few days later, as I sat at home on a Saturday, reviewing my case notes at my kitchen table. My calls home had been infrequent and short until recently, but I had since tried to call home at least once each week. I realized that mom could give me advice that was easier to handle than that of my younger brother. Despite how my parents' relationship had ended, mom knew what I should say whenever I had a question concerning Jessica, if only through lack of experience on her part. And sometimes she was willing to just let me vent.

"I've been working on this case for months," I told her. "And every time I help them get one step forward, everybody else wants to take two, three steps back and revisit what we've already decided."

"Merging companies is a big deal," mom said.

I blew out a sigh, away from the phone. "I know, but it's almost like Dryden and Makgregor don't even want to do this anymore. And here I am, with my promotion riding on the outcome of this merger."

The other end of the line was quiet for a time, but I knew my mom was still there. There wasn't any breathing or general static to indicate so, but a silence that indicated presence and quiet thought. I used to make sure she was still there, prompt her to respond, but sometime during one of my rants I just stopped talking, and when I finally returned to the conversation she was still there. So I'd started to wait on her.

Eventually she said, "I know you're looking forward to this promotion."

"I'm very much looking forward to it."

“Like I said, I know you’re looking forward to this promotion, and you think that everything is riding on this merger. But if they’ve already considered you, then you have a shot at the job regardless.”

“But they’ve told me, straight up, that my promotion rides on this deal.”

“Maybe it doesn’t,” my mom said.

“But what if it does?” I had to close my mouth and put my forehead to my knuckles. “I really want... I really need this promotion.”

“Adam,” she said softly, her voice sounding for the first time like it was far away and not directly in my ear. “You need to figure out if this is something that you want, or something that you need. The two are very different.”

“Can’t I have both?”

“You need to know the difference.”

“Dryden and Makgregor need to figure out the differences in their stock conversion plans,” I commented.

“I think that it’s a good plan on their part to make sure they know what they’re doing.”

“But we’ve been working on it for nearly a month.” I had been sitting for the majority of our conversation, but now I was pacing, frustrated once again just by the thought of having to go over the merger plans. Again.

“Better to work it all out than rush into something and realize it’s not what you wanted,” mom offered.

“I just hope they figure out what they want so I can be done with all of this nonsense.”

“I hope so, too,” my mom said. Static came from her end of the line, probably from shifting the phone and her hair rubbing against the receiver.

“I’m sorry I’m getting so angry about this,” I told her through the phone. “It’s just so frustrating.”

“Welcome to being an adult.”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. “It sucks.”

Her laugh came through short and distorted. “Yes it does.”

“Well I won’t keep you any longer,” I said.

“Okay.”

“I’ll talk to you again soon.”

She said, “I love you. Talk soon.”

“Love you, too.” I hung up the phone and then took my seat in my folding chair, placing my feet on the sticking linoleum floor. Then I leaned forward to place my head in my folded arms, in the only space available amongst all the papers and folders piled atop my kitchen table.

## Chapter 18

That evening Jessica and I went out to catch a movie. It was the latest in a series of young adult dystopian novel adaptations, and while she and I were both rather invested in the series, I didn't pay much attention to the film.

I'd picked Jessica up at her apartment, as usual. This time I parked my Volvo on the street so that we could walk alongside each other to the theater some five blocks down the road. I kissed her hello, then we hurried to the theater to catch the show time. Once we made it to the theater and were waiting in line to buy our tickets, I took Jessica's hand and held it mine. She glanced up at me and shot me a quick smile.

We sat in the dark theater and watched the movie. Just watched. At one point Jessica rested her head on my shoulder for a while, removing it again during a particularly gripping scene, turning towards me briefly to indicate her surprise with an open mouth and wide eyes. Otherwise we shared the rigid armrest between us, my elbow resting towards the rear and her forearm dangling over the front.

After the movie I suggested we take a walk to the nearby park. She smiled up at me with those green eyes guarded by black-rimmed glasses, something she had become more accustomed to wearing since we first started dating. So we walked, and I took her hand, her fingers interlocking with mine when prompted. The night was chilly for September. Her cheeks were slightly pink. I could feel the color rising in my own face. I thought Jessica beautiful, from her wavy dark blonde hair down to her clumsy large feet that still managed to bump into undersides of tables. Every time I told her I loved her I meant it. I thoroughly enjoyed my moments with her, and I wanted to spend more with her.

We'd both thought that with my impending promotion I'd have a little more time to see her. Instead my hours at the office and finishing up paperwork at home had increased. We got to see each other about as often as I called home, which only happened once each week. A movie was all I'd had planned for this week.

We sat down on one of the park benches. Some of the houses around here had started to put out Halloween decorations. Orange lights in the shape of pumpkins shone in the dark. I looked at Jessica. "Did you like the movie?"

"It wasn't spectacular, but it was worth seeing."

"Would you rather have done something else?"

"We are doing something else," she teased. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad we finally get to see each other. You're always so busy."

I looked out across the park. "I know."

"I miss seeing you," Jessica said. I turned to look at her. "Let's do things like this more often."

"I miss you, too," I said. "But work has just been overwhelming."

Jessica leaned back against the bench. "It's been overwhelming ever since you got the job."

"I've been trying to get promoted."

She poked me in the chest. "You've been trying to give yourself an ulcer."

"It's my job," I countered.

"And it's my job to watch out for you."

"You've been doing a great job of it so far," I said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

The edge of Jessica's mouth twitched in what I assume was a grin. "I only wish I could do better."

I drew her into an embrace, her hair tickling my nose. "Trust me, you've been doing just fine."

She drew away from me and looked at me square, her eyes not moving from mine. "I want you to stop these long hours after the merger's done."

"What?"

"You can't keep this up," she argued. "As a lawyer you're going to have late nights and long weeks, I understand this. But you're doing something completely different."

"I'm working to make partner."

"You're working yourself to death."

I drew back my head. "Am I started to lose weight or something?"

"You're starting to look a little different," she said with some hesitation. Then she looked down, playing with the zipper on her coat.

"Hey," I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. She turned to look at me. "Soon. This whole thing should be done in a week, and we won't have to worry about this, I promise. It'll be over soon, okay?"

I kissed her. She said, "Okay."

After a little while on the bench, I took Jessica's hand and we walked back to her apartment. We went upstairs to have some hot chocolate, but eventually we found ourselves in the warm blanket of the dark.

## Chapter 19

The weekend came and left all too quickly. I left Jessica for work, looking forward to Thursday when I would see her again. But meanwhile I spent my days occupied within my office, surrounded within my kitchen, and burdened within my mind by legalese and the fleeting semblance of a finished case.

On Monday I met with representatives of Dryden.

On Tuesday, Makgregor.

On Wednesday I addressed the many other cases that came into the office and dealt with potential clients.

When Thursday came I had only litigation between me and Jessica, between us and a peaceful dinner at Bistro 24 with Henry and Mary. Until Ryan knocked on my door. He was one of the firm's partners and had been on the merger with me.

"Hey, Adam," he said. "Mind if I talk to you?"

I shook my head. "Not at all. Come in." Ryan came into my office, closing the door behind him. "What's up?"

He stood on the other side of my desk, his hands in his pockets. "So how're you holding up?"

I frowned, unsure why he'd stopped in to ask after my well-being. "Just fine, thanks."

"Good, good," he said, nodding his head. "I just wanted to make sure you'd been able to get everything else squared away considering how much time you've been spending on the merger."

"Oh," I said in seeming understanding. "Yeah, I finished up most of the stuff yesterday. I've got court later today, so I'm pretty much caught up."

“Good, good,” Ryan said again. “I’ll make sure to send you some more clients your way.”

“But won’t that affect my work for Dryden-Makgregor?” Second to Ryan, I was primary lead on the case.

“You won’t have to worry about that anymore.” Ryan bit his lip. “The merger fell through. Dryden stepped away from the table, basically when they were about to sign.”

“Oh,” I said, leaning back in my chair. “Wow, I can’t believe that. After the months we spent on it?”

“Yep, that’s how it goes sometimes,” he said. “But because the merger fell through, I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.”

“Which would be?”

Ryan took one hand out of his pocket, placing it on the edge of my desk, balancing on the tips of his fingers. “Without this on your résumé, I can’t justify your promotion.”

“What? What do you mean you can’t?”

“You were up for non-equity partner after only a few years. Without something as big as Dryden-Makgregor, there’s nothing we can do.”

My elbows were already on my desk, my hands running through my dark brown hair. “So you’re telling me that we’ve been working for months on this, and not only are we not getting commission on the merger, you can’t promote me?”

“You’ll be promoted after the next project, I swear. But if I promote you now, I’ll get asked where your experience is for a junior partnership. I just need you on one more merger and you’ll get the position.”

I put my hand over my mouth, looking at anything except Ryan’s face. All the hours, all the late nights had been nearly pointless. All the time spent with no more than a square foot of



space at my kitchen table was going to be extended indefinitely. Everyone would expect it of me since this is what I had been working towards since college. Now they knew what I was capable of. I had years ahead of me before I could once again hope that things could get better. “If you can’t give it to me now, how do I know I’ll get it the next time around?”

“I’d give it to you now if I could!” Ryan sat on the armrest of the chair opposite me, the one where clients normally got news from me. “Look, for the senior partners, it’s all about where the money’s going. I know you deserve this. If it weren’t for Dryden, I’d be congratulating you right now. I’ll even put it in writing if you want.”

I shook my head. I knew he was telling the truth. Ryan got up. “I’m sorry, Adam. I really am.” And he left my office.

I sat with my arms crossed, upright and presentable in my seat for the entire litigation, but cross and stern. It may have even helped intimidate the opposition, but when it finished, I got in my car and drove back to the apartment to change. I had to look nice. Everyone was expecting it.

## Chapter 20

I tried to shake the mood I was in. This was supposed to be a fun evening, something Jessica would enjoy. I met her at her door: “Hello.”

Her smile drained somewhat. Apparently I hadn’t managed to be as charming as I thought I could be. “I’m sorry. I just had a bad day at work.” I leaned forward to kiss her softly, hoping to alleviate some of her dismay. “You look gorgeous.”

And she did. She was wearing a slim grey dress that melded into one strap over her left shoulder. Her wavy hair was up in a sort of messy bun and she had in her contacts. She was lovely – my mood considerably less so.

“Let’s go have dinner. It’s all on Henry tonight!” I tried to joke. Jessica gave me a complimentary smile.

We arrived at Bistro 24 a quarter past eight. Henry and Mary were waiting for us. Henry stood up to greet us. It was a model from a magazine, not my brother, who stood there with the beautiful Mary. He was wearing a black sports jacket with white button-up shirt and dark wash jeans. She was in a green dress that shimmered like the grasses of a meadow as the wind blows over them, her dark brown hair straight down her back. I looked at myself. I had the clothes to play the part, but was not in any condition to act.

We sat down. The waiter brought us drinks and appetizers.

“So, Mary, where’d you meet Henry?” Jessica asked

“Senior year. At a party, actually,” Mary laughed. “He was very drunk, but very charming.”

Henry laughed. “I don’t know if I’d say charming. I may have thought I was, but I doubt it.”

He was being modest. Of course Henry had been charming. I'd seen him at parties, the way he flirted with women he'd just met, clapped guys on the back as if they'd known each other for years. He was a talker, and a smooth one at that, no matter how inebriated he may have been. Even now he made us all feel a little less inadequate through his modesty.

"No, no. You were very sweet. I remember when I told you my name, you said that I was in one of your favorite songs."

"Oh yeah. Mambo No. 5 by Lou Bega. 'A little bit of Mary all night long...' Actually," he said, turning to Jessica. "You're name is in the song, too."

"Don't tell me Adam used the same line on you," Mary joked.

Jessica shook her head laughing. "No, he didn't."

"Okay, how did you and Adam meet?"

I stayed silent. Jessica was happy to answer, "At the bookstore. Adam had a job during grad school, and when he saw me walking the shelves he asked if I needed any help. I told him I did, and after some time chatting and finding out they didn't have the book in stock, I asked if I could call ahead to see if they had it in the future. He said sure, gave me the store number, and then he gave me his number. He said it was in case I had any other questions."

Henry chuckled. "It was one of the few times Adam was actually smooth."

Jessica rubbed my arm. "Most of the time he is," she said looking into my eyes.

I gave her a quick smile. The way she told the story of how we met was always so much more endearing than hearing me talk about it. And whenever she talked about that day she would pause in her speech, give me a quick touch. When she did it this time I almost had to leave the table because I only wanted her to keep thinking about the day we met, not the day when I would tell her my long days at work weren't over.

Jessica turned back to Henry. “So how’s your job with the chemical company?”

A bark of laughter left Henry’s lips. “Nonexistent. I got fired today.”

“What?” she and I both exclaimed.

“I went in like normal. Towards the end of the day the boss calls me into his office and says, ‘We don’t need you anymore.’”

“I offered to postpone dinner until another night, especially since your back’s flaring up again,” Mary began.

“But when you showed up at my door looking this lovely with a big smile on your face, I couldn’t cancel. I decided I’d rather go out with you than pout any day.” Mary’s face broke in a grin and she gave Henry a kiss.

I was very suddenly pulled out of my reverie and into a state of utter astonishment. My brother had lost his job, and yet he looked better than ever and sounded just as happy. Our entrées had already been cleared away by the time I was much aware of the people at the table with me. Henry had lost his job, but still he reached for the check. I stopped him. “Don’t worry, I’ll get this.”

Henry gave his head a vigorous shake. “No, I’ve got it. I invited you all out. And besides, it’s the least I can do to thank you all for cheering me up.”

As we walked to our cars, the girls waiting inside the restaurant, I tried to find out what was really going on with Henry. “Why didn’t you let me get the check? You’ll be hurting for money in a few weeks. I mean, you lost your job!”

“So what?” Henry replied with a sidelong glance at me. “I can get another job. I can’t get another night like this. I’d rather be strong and put aside the disappointment and worry. All four of us together and enjoying each other’s company is worth the money.”

“But soon you won’t have any. What will you do then?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure right now. I’ll figure it out though.”

“I just don’t understand,” I said. “How did you lose your job? I thought they loved you there.”

“It probably had a little to do with my back,” Henry explained. “It’s been flaring up now and then so I can’t always be working in the lab. But then there were just general layoffs on top of that.”

“Have you gotten your back checked out? How will you pay for stuff like that?”

“Like I said, I’ll figure something out. We’ve been through worse than this, believe me.”  
We had reached Henry’s car and he reached into his pocket for his keys.

“Yeah, and we still needed money,” I retorted.

Henry opened his car door. “Don’t worry, Adam. I’ll be fine. I need a lot of other things before I need money.” He got into his car, then he left to take Mary home.

Money had long been a difficult factor in our lives. When dad left we’d struggled to make ends meet, to the extent that even I was working. Whatever happened, of course I’d help Henry, but after all we’d been through as children, I couldn’t understand his cavalier attitude about the whole situation. I picked Jessica up at the front door of the restaurant, Henry heavy on my mind. She and I were both quiet for some time, the highway lights passing over us, illuminating the interior of the car for a second before plunging it back into darkness. I was still thinking about my brother. How could Henry be happy right now? Finally Jessica asked, “What’s the matter? What happened at work today?”

I sighed. “It’s nothing. I shouldn’t have been so upset by it.”

“No, tell me. It’s obviously bothering you.” I didn’t answer at first. I didn’t want to sound petty next to Henry. But eventually Jessica pushed, “Adam...”

“I didn’t get the promotion.”

“Oh no!” she said. “I’m so sorry. Did they say why?”

I explained the situation, what Ryan had told me. “It was not the kind of news I’d been hoping for.”

“Of course not,” Jessica consoled. “And to think Henry lost his job today, too.”

“Yeah,” I murmured. I took the exit towards Jessica’s house.

“Well, at least you know you’ll get the promotion next time.”

“But I was going to move out of my apartment.”

She shrugged. “It’s only a little while longer until you get your raise. Go ahead and move out now.”

“It could be years before I get promoted.” That wouldn’t work. All my plans would shift. “I was just hoping that I’d be able to have you over more often if I could afford a nicer place.”

“You think I don’t want to come over to your apartment now?”

I licked my lips. “That’s not what I meant. I just don’t want you to have to come over to some dingy little place.”

“Adam, that doesn’t matter to me. It has never mattered to me.” Jessica sat in the passenger’s seat, staring hard at me. We were driving down her street.

“It matters to me. I want you to have a nice place to...”

“That better not be your excuse for us seeing each other as infrequently as we do.”

I parked the car along the side of the street and turned in my seat. “Of course not! I was working on the merger...”

“Which is over now,” she interrupted. “Now you’ll go back to normal hours, you can work like a normal person, and you can do whatever you want, even move into a new apartment.”

“I need more time to save,” I explained. “And to get the promotion I’ll need to keep working long hours. They’ll stop considering me otherwise.”

“You need to keep working? So that you could get this promotion and buy a nicer place? So that I’d want to come see you more often?” Jessica took a deep breath. “Look, I don’t care where I meet you, just so long as I can see you! Last week in the park, tonight at dinner, wherever.”

“But without this merger I…”

“Screw the merger, okay, Adam?” Jessica searched my eyes for understanding. I looked back steadily and nodded. She sighed. “Look, I’m sorry you didn’t get the promotion. I really am. But I think you’re looking at this the wrong way. Okay?”

Again I nodded. She bid me goodnight before getting out of the car, but she left with only a brush of her fingers over mine. I watched her safely to the front door of her apartment building, then left for my own. The events of the night continued to replay in my head. I hadn’t gotten the promotion, which angered me. But Henry had lost his job, and I was significantly more upset than he, which confused me. And Jessica was angry with me for wanting to keep working hard towards a promotion, even though it would benefit her. My grip on the steering wheel changed frequently, sometimes one-handed, at other times white-knuckled. I needed someone to talk to. I needed someone to explain things.

## Chapter 21

It wasn't the length of the drive that ever deterred me from going home, nor was it the mountainous highway that strained my 4-cylinder engine until it whined and cried for me to stop going uphill. I kept trying to tell myself that I rarely went home because I'd been so busy since going off to college, but, no, there was something about driving back home that made me feel like I'd lost something, that I'd taken a step back.

I turned off I-81 onto the state route that would lead to my childhood home. The oddities that so often popped up on the nearby farms still intrigued me. Bright red metal barns, a radio tower built over a one-level ranch home, the estates that tried to build in a Spanish stucco style on the opposite side of the road from a dilapidated wooden structure that had probably in the family for years. Each one was just another landmark that paled in comparison to the rising swells of blue-tinged mass that made up the Blue Ridge Mountains. And my car was just another blip passing through their majesty, going 55 miles per hour in the hope that someday I'd reach a level of similar grandeur.

The state route eventually crossed over the James River, using the bridge that I had so often crossed to visit Danny and Violet. They had moved away after college, now married high school sweethearts. Jim never went to college, but he, too, had moved away, following work where it was more readily available.

Very little of what I'd known as a child remained. Sure, as I pulled up the front driveway, gravel and dirt crushed alike as I maneuvered my car down the long path, childhood memories came flooding back. There was the river where paddlers and kayakers would venture every summer, but those were not the same people that had used my tree a decade earlier. The bike I'd used to ride up the street for Mr. Fulson's ice cream was sitting, rusted and with deflated tires, in



the open garage. I couldn't use the bike anymore, and Mr. Fulson had long since passed. Only my mother still remained in this godforsaken town. She still looked much like she did when she was younger. Maybe a few wrinkles had been added around her brown eyes and her hair contained more gray than any other color, but she was still the same. Somehow she'd managed to escape the current that seemed to draw everything and everyone else away.

I walked quickly up the front walk, past the flowering bushes and ornamental grass to embrace my mom. I'd missed her. Away, and preoccupied with work, I forgot what it was like to feel the warmth of her arms around me. A large lump formed in my throat. I forced myself to swallow it and to stop my eyes from getting any wetter. Pulling out of the embrace, I saw my mom's eyes were also glistening.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to see you on your birthday, mom."

"Oh," she started. "Never mind that. You're here now." She ushered me inside. "Though perhaps I should be asking why you don't visit more often, in general?"

I continued to apologize. It was an honest question, one that I knew she wanted me to answer. But at the same time I don't think she really cared because I was visiting now. I think if given the option, she would have held me all day. That would have suited me just fine. But I actually wanted to talk to her. I wanted my mom to wrap me up in advice rather than her arms. She had always been so good at listening, at understanding. If only I'd taken the time to speak to her sooner.

We walked into the kitchen, my mom seating me at the round kitchen table, just like she used to when I'd been a kid.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "I've got some meatloaf in the fridge that I can heat up."

I loved my mom's meatloaf. In a few minutes I was tucking into a big plate of it with green beans. My mom sat next to me with a plate of her own, but she didn't start eating right away. She sat with her chin in hand, looking at me. "Do you realize how much you and your brother look alike?"

I shrugged. "Not really."

"Well, I managed to raise two very handsome men," she said as she ruffled my hair.

I didn't push her hand away. "Maybe we look alike, but we definitely don't think alike."

My mom swallowed a bite of meatloaf. "Well I don't think any two people really think all that similarly."

"Just some of the things he does. I don't understand Henry."

"I don't think any of us do, Adam," she joked.

"I mean, he just lost his job, Mom..."

She nodded. "I know. He told me yesterday."

"And he didn't seem to mind! How can he not be worried?"

My mom set down her fork. "Worried about what?"

"About everything!" My frustration found its way out. "He already spends a lot. What is he going to do if he can't find another job? I asked him what his plans were, and he told me not to worry."

"I don't think he's really worried about the money right now."

"Yeah I know. But don't you think he should be?"

"Do you?" my mom asked.

My hands moved about, trying to explain my thoughts by themselves. "Well, yeah. It's important! You need money to survive."

My mom leaned towards me. “Yes, money’s important. But you also need to just do some things.”

“Yeah, he just needs to admit that money is important and he needs it. He can’t keep spending it,” I retorted.

“No,” mom said with a shake of her head. “I said it’s important, not that he needs it.”

“So you’re saying you don’t think he should find a new job?”

“Adam, you know that’s not what I’m saying.” My mom stood from her spot at the table and carried away my empty plate to the sink. The sound of running water kept us quiet for a few moments. I huffed and looked away, taking in the adjoining living room. The couch was a decade or two old, the television was a big, bulky, analog. The carpet was newer, but it was covered by rugs. But what were most noticeable were all the picture frames of me, of Henry.

“You think I should visit more often?” I asked.

My mom placed the now washed dish in the dishwasher and returned to the table. “I definitely think you should visit more often. You and your brother, both. We can all sit down together here. I can only talk to one of you at a time over the phone.”

“We live awfully far away, mom.”

“And someday you may live further,” she responded. “But promise me you’ll still visit. Don’t take years to come see me again?”

I promised, sealing my words with an embrace that felt more binding than I’d intended. “Maybe you could come see us? Or move up to Columbus where we’d be able to take care of you.”

“You’ll always be my son,” she said. “I will be the one trying to take care of you for as long as I possibly can, no matter what.”

“Thanks, mom.” I smiled at her.

She didn’t quite smile back. “Even when I have to do it alone, and even when I don’t hear from you, I’m still going to try and take care of you.”

I had to turn my gaze away from my mom when I said, “I’m sorry I didn’t visit sooner.”

“Adam, all Henry wants to do is not spend his time worrying. He’ll bounce back. We all do. But worried time is something we’ll never get back.” She looked into my eyes, pausing to then take a napkin and dab her eyes. “That’s why I missed so much, worrying instead of fixing things.”

She’d always come to understandings with my dad, but they did take a long time to achieve. And it was he who took me to make sure the local canoe outfitters knew the tree was mine. Dad had been the one to do things with me.

My mom said, “Your brother wants to spend time with you and with Mary. He can figure out the money later. Perhaps that’s something I should have learned sooner.”

I left my mom’s sometime the next day. I beeped my horn as I drove away, wishing I’d stayed longer. I thought about my dad at that moment, wondering if he’d ever looked back when he drove away. It had been so hard on my mom, on all of us. Henry used to cry himself to sleep every night. I would just lie in bed, pretending to be asleep when my mom came in to kiss me goodnight. But as soon as she was gone, my eyes were open, searching the walls for something, anything to explain why dad was gone. But I never complained, and to make sure I didn’t, I stopped talking. I was determined to handle things like a man.

If it hadn’t been for Henry, I don’t think I would have survived the experience. The rage I felt at my dad, the sadness that he’d no longer come and tuck us in tight, that he’d no longer tell

us how much he loved us, was destroying me. But it had been destroying Henry more. So I had begun talking to him again.

Having completed the tedious seven hour drive back to Columbus, I sat on my lumpy couch to watch a movie, tired and without desire to do much of anything. But my phone vibrated in my pocket, illuminating the screen to display Jessica's name and face. I picked up and answered, "Hello?"

"How was the drive?" her voice came from over the phone. I'd told her the day before that I'd made the trip home to see my mom.

I yawned. "Long."

"Oh, so you're probably pretty tired then," she reasoned. "Well, I won't keep you long. I know you've got to get back to the office again tomorrow."

"Well, actually..." I began. I'd already spent over fourteen hours of the weekend simply driving. "Hey, I was wondering... I mean, I just wanted to ask if you were, if you were doing anything tonight?"

"No. Come on over. I'll order pizza if you want."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. We'll eat in a nice apartment tonight."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Okay, I'll leave in a few minutes."

"See you soon."

For some reason I was shy. It was as if I was on my first date with her, unsure of how I should act. We ate the pizza, then settled back on her couch. She curled up against me, putting her head on my chest. I was suddenly reminded of her putting her head on my shoulder in the movie theater the previous week. Then I'd thought it was nothing special, but now I realized it

was exactly what I wanted from the night. I didn't want to be spread out on the couch, alone in my apartment. I wanted someone to be telling me to scooch over. Someone to turn to and talk about a scene in the film. It was hard to understand why the world could be so difficult convoluted, but this was a simple complexity that two people could navigate.

## Chapter 22

One Saturday in November I warned Jessica that I'd be running errands most of the day. Most weekends we spent together, but I'd be running from one store to another, picking up shampoo and deodorant, groceries and dry cleaning, books for work trips and running to the bank, and I didn't think she'd be interested in going with me.

Of course I wasn't at all surprised when she said she wouldn't mind. She had to take care of some of those things as well.

Therefore it was together that we ran errands. I'd become accustomed to our conversations while riding in the car, so my voice acted out of supposed muscle memory, independent of my calculating thoughts and what I carried with me.

Driving around Columbus had always been so much of a solitary task for me. With my own agenda and my busy schedule, why would I ever find myself in the car with someone else? It was only ever one, not two, people who looked over the Scioto River to see the sun set behind the COSI building or rise behind the skyscrapers that conveniently spelled O-H-I-O. Not that I could complain, this city where I'd spent most of my adult life, to now have another person point out the cloud of birds settling on the power lines as we passed underneath.

A few pointed spectacles outside the car windows, two sing-alongs with the radio, and three hours of errands brought us to the bookstore. I pulled into an empty space in the parking lot, reversing in due to the busyness of the area, and turned off the engine. Jessica and I undid our seatbelts, she getting out of the car faster than I. Before opening my own door I double-checked my pockets, grabbed my keys, and took a deep breath.

The wind whipped up the light dusting of snow that had fallen the night previous, causing us to squint and jog to the front door of the store. Just like the one I'd worked at, the front doors

were made of heavy wood, distinguishing this storefront from the others. Jessica and I hurried in, and as soon as I was out of the cold I shivered against the sudden change in temperature. Jessica removed her scarf from her face and wiped her glasses to resist the onsetting fog. She was also wearing her knit hat, and I couldn't keep from smiling.

“What?” she said once she could finally see me again, the idiot grin still upon my face.

“Nothing,” I responded, not even trying to restrain my facial feature. “Just looking, that’s all.”

“Well, let’s get inside so you can start looking for the book you need.”

We progressed inside the store, and suddenly everything I’d learned during the few years I’d worked at Lennox was fresh in my mind. I knew my way around this bookstore and I’d probably be able to find the book I wanted in no time at all. Instead I expunged all knowledge I possessed concerning the layout of the bookstore. I forgot all but the topic and author of the book I wanted. I only hoped Jessica would help me.

“All right, so I’m looking for an author by the name of Martin.”

Jessica snorted. “There are a lot of authors with the last name Martin.”

“I know it’s fiction, and it’s ‘The Bright’ something,” I said. “I just can’t remember the full title.”

“Didn’t you write it down?”

“No,” I defended. “I thought I’d be able to remember it.”

“Oh, well look at this,” Jessica chuckled, placing her hands on her hips. “The bookstore employee doesn’t know his books.”

I licked my lips and said, “Hey, I haven’t worked in the bookstore for over three years. It’s been a while.”



She just laughed. “Don’t worry. I think I may be able to help you... Sir.”

“Oh, so now you’re an employee?” I nearly crumpled in relief, having confirmed she would relish the thought of getting to reverse the roles we’d played that first day we met.

“Yes I am,” she continued to play. “And I’d be happy to assist you. You said Martin in fiction?”

I outwardly sighed, pretending to be resigned to the changing of the tables. “Okay, fine. Yeah, I’m looking for a fiction book by Martin.”

“All righty, sir. Right this way.” Jessica led me down the center walkway and off to the right, acting for all the world as though she did this all the time. Though it probably didn’t hurt that the section we were headed towards had a giant sign specifying “Fiction” above it.

She stuck her head down one aisle, identifying the authors’ last names, then corrected and headed down the previous aisle. “Martin, Martin, Martin,” she murmured to herself as she skimmed the names covering the dust jackets and paperback spines. She quickly made it to the end of the aisle and then cautiously moved down the shelves until she finally found the proper section of alphabetical organization. “And what was the title?”

“It was something involving ‘Bright,’” I offered.

She looked for a moment more, then plucked a book from among its neighbors and held it out to me. “*The Bright Forever* by Lee Martin. Is this what you were looking for?”

I took the book, knowing it was in fact the one that I was looking for, but I never let my gaze, or my smile, stray from Jessica. “Why, yes it is. Thank you, miss.”

“You are quite welcome, sir,” she said, trying to keep a straight face. “Did you have any other questions today?”

“Actually, I did have another question.” I set the book down on the shelf next to me and put my hands in my pockets, bouncing up onto the balls of my feet. “I know that we technically met in the bookstore in December, but I wanted to ask sooner than that.”

I took my hands from my pockets, one moving to open the box that was in the other. I took one knee and asked, “Jessica, will you marry me?”

While the glow that spread across her face was something that only I could see, it didn’t make for a solitary moment. We were both a part of watching the sun rise, the bright forever that began when Jessica rolled her lips and nodded with eyes full of joy. We were both there together to point out that now was a time that we were spending together, a time when I could finally understand what being quiet for your loved ones meant – to be present, but silent, if only so you can better hear the closeness of your minds.

## Chapter 23

Six months later Henry stood next to me, both of us looking at our tuxedo-clad reflections.

Henry clapped me on the back. “You’re getting married, man!”

I took a deep breath. “I’m getting married.”

I sat on the edge of my bed to put on my freshly polished black shoes.

“Are you excited?”

“Yeah.”

“Nervous?”

“Very.”

“What are you going to do when you see her walk down the aisle?”

I snorted. So many questions. I suppose they were warranted since I hadn’t spoken to Henry much in the past months. His job search had been a more drawn out process than anyone was hoping, but it had been fruitful. He hadn’t even been at the bachelor party because his back pain had flared up again. I told him to go to the doctor and figure out what was causing the pain, but other than that this was the first time we’d been able to talk. “I don’t know. I guess we’ll find out.” I stood and drew my brother into a hug. “Thanks for being here.”

“I’m glad I was able to make it,” Henry said into my shoulder, with a tinge of sadness that I didn’t expect to hear in his voice.

We stood there for a time, neither moving, only pulled close to each other as brothers ought to be, then we separated and got back to last minute adjustments to our attire. “You’re not going to be a lone wolf anymore,” Henry continued. “Now you’re going to have a lady tagging along all the time.”

“Maybe someday two ladies will be joining us,” I said, giving my brother a meaningful glance as I walked past him out of the room.

From behind me I heard, “Actually, I wanted to ask you something about that.”

I turned to look at Henry, leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed but his face alight. “About what?” I asked

“About Mary.” He was breathy with excitement, but his actions were deliberate. He opened his mouth to speak, but reached into his pocket instead. He pulled out a small black box. I knew what that was. I had bought one less than a year ago. Henry flipped back the lid to reveal a stunning white-gold engagement ring. Three diamonds adorned the band. “I want to propose to Mary.”

I broke out in a huge grin. “Really? Congratulations! When?”

“I was hoping today, if that’s okay?”

“You just had to steal my thunder,” I said with an insincere roll of the eyes.

Henry said, “Hey, that’s why I asked! Can’t be ruining my big brother’s wedding.”

I laughed. “So long as you do it after Jessica’s and my first dance, I don’t care.”

“Okay, good,” said Henry, putting the box back in his pocket, then staying with his hand stowed away. “I just really think it’d be best to ask as soon as possible.”

“Just wait a few more hours. Jessica will kill you if you steal the spotlight tonight.” I hugged my brother again. “Come on. The sooner I get married, the sooner you can propose.”

One of the groomsmen had offered his house as the place for us all to get ready, so we all climbed into our respective cars and made our way over to the church. Mom rode with Henry and me, having flown into town earlier in the week. Her face exuded almost the same light that I

had seen in Jessica's the day I'd proposed. When I'd first asked her over the phone if I was making the right decision, she'd said that if I'd found happiness then I should chase it.

So perhaps it wasn't her light that I saw, but my own, reflected in the faces of those that cared. At the church the wedding party processed in and I took my place at the altar, waiting to have and to hold Jessica's hands. Henry stood next to me, glancing over to make sure I was still all right. Mom sat in the front row, her pleasure evident on her face. And as I looked around the church, the friends and family of Jessica and I, the bridesmaids in their cerulean dresses and the groomsmen in their complimentary suits, I knew that they all saw my face and that Jessica saw me standing for her, and they saw that I was happy.

I smiled continuously as I looked into her green eyes, waves of energy flowing through my body. I saw her, beautifully dressed in her wedding gown, and could only think how lucky I was that she was willing to meet me in front of this crowd. How many times I had thought I would never reach my journey's end, that the world was too cruel to let anyone slow down and find something other than one desire. I could only think of the better in those moments when Jessica took one step, then the next, never faltering, never straying, the worse nonexistent. And all the while I stood there, for Jessica, for Henry, for mom, and for my dad. He had given me good advice, if only I hadn't known how to take it: that I should be able to stand alone, but only because you're waiting for someone to join you.

Jessica and I exchanged vows, promising to love each other, for richer or for poorer, promotion or not. When we walked down the aisle, I knew that I'd be there to support her and help her walk through sickness and health. And as we burst through the church doors, just having been introduced for the first time as Mr. and Mrs. Adam Cistryn, I hoped we'd live days as happy as this until death did us part.

I had never been happier in my entire life. Whenever I attended weddings, I always used to think the clinking of utensils against plates and cups for the married couple to kiss was annoying. But up there at the front of the hall, all I wanted to do was kiss Jessica. I hoped the guests would start clinking and never stop.

We eventually found ourselves out on the dance floor, Etta James serenading us with “At Last.” At last I understood what my mom had been trying to explain. At last I understood why Henry had been more concerned about the dinner at Bistro 24 than losing his job. While I was still astounded by his resilience to disappointment, while I still did not know where he hid his grief, I understood where he found his happiness. And I rocked back and forth with Jessica’s hand in mine, truly bringing someone along with me on my journey down the river, at last.

The band began to play, and everyone joined in the fun, dancing away the night. I completely forgot that Henry had planned on proposing, but as the guests began to leave and the crowd thinned, I caught a glimpse of my brother and the lovely Mary through the enormous panoramic windows on the one side of the reception hall. They were leaning against the low brick wall out on the terrace. I silently wished him luck. But I would have to wait for the news until after Jessica and I returned from our honeymoon.

## Chapter 24

We returned from France a week later. I listened to my voicemail, but there had been no phone call. I called Henry, but he didn't pick up. It wasn't until two days later that I heard from him.

"Hey, Adam. How're you doing?" he asked me, his cheery self.

"I'm doing just fine. You?"

"I'm great. Listen, I was wondering if you'd swing by today?"

"Sure. I can do that. But I won't be there until later. Say seven?"

After work I drove to Henry's apartment. I was excited to hear the good news.

I pulled into the parking garage and was surprised to see Henry there, waiting for me. We said hello and made our way to the elevators. The fourth floor hallway still had that sense of warmth. Henry opened his apartment door. It was dark inside. He tossed his keys onto the coffee table, which was illuminated by a shaft of the warm light from the hallway. We walked into his apartment, closing the door behind us. It was dark.

I sat down on the couch. The cushions felt cold for some reason. Henry made his way into the kitchen where there was a single bright light on. He opened the refrigerator, took out some peanut butter, jelly, and bread. He asked if I would like a sandwich. I said no, thank you. After making himself a snack, he sat down on the couch with me. He grabbed the remote from the cushion next to him and flicked on the flat screen television. Some black-and-white movie was on.

Henry took a bite of his sandwich, hunched over his plate so he wouldn't leave crumbs on the floor. The bright light from the television screen lit the floor and table in front of it, but

the large expanse of white behind the TV was still shadowy, the light from the kitchen unable to stretch its beams to the far corners. The volume was muted, but Henry didn't turn it up.

"So, what's up?" I asked.

"Eh, nothing much," Henry said, his focus on the sandwich in his hands. "Just haven't seen you since the wedding. How was the honeymoon? I bet France was beautiful."

"It was wonderful. Jessica took plenty of pictures. We'll have to show you sometime."

"All right," Henry said. He took another bite of sandwich. "Oh, and by the way, I've been meaning to tell you, I went to see the doctor about my back."

That wasn't what I was expecting to hear. I was sure he'd bring up Mary as soon as we saw each other. I waited for him to say something more, but no speech was forthcoming. I frowned. "Henry, what happened with you and Mary?"

He looked up from his sandwich. He opened his mouth to respond when he happened to glance at the TV screen. It was a Christmas-in-July marathon and he and I both recognized the movie: *It's a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey and Mary Hatch were dancing along the edge of the pool.

Henry excused himself. I heard him take a sharp intake of breath followed by a shuddering sigh, before walking into the bathroom and closing the door. I sat there on the couch in relative darkness, the movie still quiet. A few minutes passed before he returned, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. He sat back down and picked up his sandwich, but he did not continue eating. Instead he continued to watch the movie as George held on to Mary's robe outside the old Granville house.

"Henry," I said softly. "What happened?"



“Well,” he said, his eyes never leaving the television screen. “I took her out onto the terrace. It was so beautiful out there. The skies were clear, the wedding was lovely, she was...” Henry blinked a few times. “She was stunning. And we talked for a little bit. I’d already gone to see the doctor, and so I told her about that. Then when I’d steered the conversation where I wanted, I... I got down on one knee and I ask – asked her to marry me. And she... she said no.”

I didn’t know what to say. “What’s the doctor got to do with this?”

He pursed his lips, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “She said that she – that she wasn’t ready. And I said okay. Th-that’s fine. And I’ve tried to be fine, I’ve tried to... I just...” He opened his mouth to speak, but had to close it again and swallow. He brought his hand to his mouth and took a quaking breath.

I was suddenly reminded of sitting under a tree behind our house, watching the paddlers and kayakers go down the river. Our dad had been gone for weeks and neither of us had come to terms with it. Six-year-old Henry had started to cry. I knew why he was crying, and I could feel the same pain in my chest. How could our dad do this to us? How could he do this to Henry? I took him in my arms then, wanting to show that I was there for him, that he still had me.

I did the same now. I put my arm around his shoulder and drew him into me. Sitting in his apartment, he murmured stuttered, shaky words into my shoulder. I couldn’t make them out. I whispered, “It’s okay, Henry. Talk to me.”

He pulled away from me and stood suddenly, moving away from the couch and out of the line of the television. He was silhouetted by the kitchen light, and unilluminated by the screen. Away from me he wrapped his arms around himself, his voice firm and unemotional as he said, “The doctor said the pain wasn’t because of my back. It was pancreatic cancer. They haven’t

found how bad it is, but they're sure it's metastasized. So I asked Mary if she would stand by me through it and..."

His feigned indifference must have been apparent to even him, for now Henry stood there in his apartment, away from me, alone. There was no way I could stand, no way I could support him. I sat, stunned, as his every ragged breath took away mine as if to keep him from finally sinking to the beige carpet, his chest curling to his knees, his hands over his face. Then both of us were left empty in the quiet dark. Both of us scared and weak.

## Chapter 25

I'd been the first one he told after Mary. The only time he ever held something back from me. It was the only time I'd ever wanted to move for him, act for him, and even though I wanted to, I couldn't.

When finally we'd been able to speak I told Henry he needed to call mom. This wasn't something he could keep, something he shouldn't have kept even this long. He only nodded. Then he made the call. At one point mom asked to speak to me. We decided she would fly back to Columbus and stay with Henry, as she had done only a few weeks earlier. This time she would stay indefinitely to help take care of him as he went through therapy. I agreed.

We hung up the phone, unmoving and quiet once again in the living room of Henry's apartment. The leather cushions weren't comfortable anymore. They felt of lumps and deteriorating upholstery. The beige carpet was bland, the room not dark enough, even with all but one glaring kitchen light. The white walls were formidable premonitions of what was to come in the whitewashed and bleached atmosphere of hospital culture – they were empty and the television was off.

It wasn't right, didn't feel real. Only a few days ago I'd returned from my honeymoon with Jessica, my wife. Only two weeks ago Henry had been ready to propose to Mary, even though he'd known even though he was in trouble. We'd been climbing a spiral staircase, higher and higher and unable to see just around the turn until the structure beneath us disappeared. Now we felt every quiver of vertigo, the paralysis so intense that it wasn't until I heard mom's choked instructions that I realized we, all of us, had fallen.

And I cursed myself.

I hated myself for thinking that life would ever give me anything save to take it away. A loving father who left in the night and stopped all communications within a couple years. Childhood friends whose companionship I traded for frequent work shifts and homework. A carefree undergraduate college career whose late nights got all too short, all too quickly. A possible promotion that had been displayed before me, a banner of what may come, but in truth only a carrot and stick. A brother whom I had finally learned to reconnect with, only to now know that he was fading from my very eyes.

“When will you know your options?” I asked. What else could I ask? The only thing in the room was cancer. The only thought on our minds was how it was infecting us both, growing into balls of disease that formed in our throats making it hard to swallow, in our brains making it hard to think, and in our stomachs making every word taste like bile.

Henry was sitting in his armchair now. He breathed in long through his nose. When he released it, his shoulders curled inward and his chest sagged. “I’ve taken all the necessary scans and bloodwork. I’m just waiting on results.”

“When will those be?”

Henry flicked his right fingers. He stared at the door to his apartment. “Maybe today. This isn’t something they’re going wait to call me about.”

“Are you going to be able to pay for all the therapy and everything?”

“I don’t know.”

“Any idea what the doctors might suggest?”

“Probably that I start chemo or go into surgery as soon as they have the test results.”

I bobbed my head, too many times to feign nonchalance. From what I knew of pancreatic cancer, the disease was deadly. There wasn't any way around it, by surgery or chemo. "Henry, how long..."

"You wanna take a walk?" he asked, cutting me off.

"I—yeah, sure," I recovered. "We can go for a walk."

"Good." Henry stood, put on his shoes, and was out the door in a moment's breath. His need to get away from the apartment was understandable, but perhaps it was also a need to get away from me. To get away from the questions I may ask, the truths I might make him accept through a secondary voice.

I hurried after my brother, trying to keep in contact with the only person that could keep me sane. He was waiting for me by the elevator, flashing me a flat smirk when I came up alongside him. A shadow of his normally cheery self, but still there.

Outside we walked, silently for the most part, my brother looking up and around him. It wasn't what I saw, what with my eyes pointed down at the ground, measuring my steps. I supposed the world looked different to Henry now that he'd been diagnosed with cancer. Perhaps seeing everything now, gilded by summer sunlight and alive with life, was exactly what he needed to cheer himself.

It only depressed me. To know that this was everything Henry would soon lose only created chills in my soul, drying my spirit and leaving only a hard stone—a tumor—in my stomach. When Henry could suffer, what chance did I have to avoid being pounded into the sidewalk by so many feet.

"Where are we going?" I asked Henry, unable to look any longer at the sidewalk.

A shrug was his response. "I thought maybe we'd go down the street. There's a small park off the Olentangy River Trail."

We went down to the trail, taking our place on a bench near the trail. Bikers blazed past us, runners jogged, and families meandered. Henry watched, intently and with a seeming purpose to study their movements. I leaned forward to brace my elbows against my knees, folding my hands in front of me and glancing up at the passing trail-goers.

The sun was setting, almost gone behind the trees across the bank. What little ruddy light was left bloodied the Olentangy with rippling color, warm colors, fiery colors. They stayed on the water surface, stagnant, unmoving, unnatural.

"Henry," I asked. "How long..."

Again he cut me off, "I don't know. Probably just until the sun sets."

That wasn't what I was asking. "No," I tried. "How long?"

Henry continued to watch the people that went by on the trail. He rolled his lips in briefly, then licked them. "I don't know, Adam." He turned and looked at me. "I really don't."

"What if the doctor calls tonight? Will he tell you?"

My brother didn't actually consider the question. His silence was too prolonged to be concerned with the yes or no answer I'd been hoping for. Still, he gave me the answer, "I won't know for sure until I get the call."

"Will they call your cell?" I asked.

"They can leave a voicemail," Henry said with a sigh. But it wasn't a sigh of the tired, or even of the sad. He sighed with content. "I'll listen to it eventually."

Then the sun dropped completely behind the trees, the last rays no longer in our eyes, but peeking through the leaves of the riverbank trees. Warm, but muted.

## Chapter 26

Henry was admitted to the hospital two days later with a diagnosis of Stage IVA pancreatic cancer. He started chemotherapy immediately in an attempt to encourage remission. The nurses gave him drugs called Gemzar and Erbitux. He started vomiting, complaining of fevers and chills, and he developed a nasty rash. But he didn't lose his hair.

"Good thing I didn't lose that," he said. "Remember when I shaved my head? My head looks weird as hell."

Even sitting by his hospital bed, chemical and saline drips needled into the crooks of both elbows, I couldn't help but chuckle. His junior year of college Henry had decided to make cutting his hair simpler, so he borrowed an electric clipper and shaved his head down to the lowest setting. There were so many odd lumps on top of his head that he never tried getting a buzz cut again. At the time, we were both thankful he didn't because he met Mary the next year, brown hair a normal length. Maybe it hadn't exactly been the best outcome.

They scheduled him for three administrations of the drug combo, and I went with him each time, taking him home at the end of the day to rest, mom watching over him. After each appointment they took blood samples to monitor his progress. And at the end of the six week period the prognosis looked good. The cancerous cells had decreased significantly and the treatment appeared to be working.

Two weeks later Henry's skin started turning yellow and his back pain returned, more excruciating than it had been before.

Whatever had been working stopped doing so. The cancer had spread again and they'd be keeping him in the hospital indefinitely to try and figure out a therapy that would work. If the cancer spread to his liver he'd likely not survive the year.

So I took visited him whenever I could, but I was still working hard at the law office. I wasn't pulling late nights, but I was leaving around seven each night. Jessica wasn't thrilled, but she said it was a start. After all, I did have a lot on my plate considering they kept insinuating a promotion was right around the corner.

It was after one of the late nights that I called home to let Jessica know I wouldn't be coming home right after work. I would go visit Henry since I hadn't spoken to him in a few days. Jessica's concern sounded over the telephone, and she passed along her well wishes.

At first, mom and I had made it a point to never leave Henry alone. But after three days Henry had had enough. I came into his room, prepared to relieve mom of her vigil, when he said, "Why don't you both go on home. I'll be fine."

I told him, "Well, we just want to make sure. Don't worry, it's not a problem."

"Adam," he said, glaring at me from his propped up position in bed. "Jessica is at home, and I'm guessing you planned on skipping dinner again. Just go home."

He was right. I hadn't had dinner, having just gotten off work. Jessica and my plans for dinner had been a parmesan chicken bake with pasta, which sounded incredible. Especially when compared to hospital food. "But we don't want to leave you alone," I argued. It was probably the last thing we wanted to do.

"If you two don't go find something more exciting to do so you can come back with stories other than work or the store, I'm gonna call the nurse and suspend all visitors." My brother had only been half joking, so we let him be. He got a phone placed in his room so he could call us and let us know that they were still pumping him with drugs, but now they were moving to something that probably would kill his hair.



So now I decided I would make just a regular, brotherly visit to see how he was holding up. Even though he wanted more interesting stories, I was going to come up empty-handed this time. Work was work was work. And work was my life aside from Jessica.

I entered through the sliding glass doors of the hospital, slinging my sport coat over my arm. The August air outside had been muggy and heavy, but the climate controlled interior of the hospital was refreshing and I needed to air out my dress shirt.

I checked in at the nurses' station and entered Henry's room. I couldn't believe how much he'd changed in just three days. His hair had already completely fallen out of his head and he had developed sickly gray bags under his eyes, as if he'd never slept, only died and been brought back to life each morning. I called out his name and he opened his eyes, pushing up on his elbows to right himself in bed. He must have lost his appetite because he didn't look too well-fed.

"Hey, Adam!" he groaned. The excitement was evident in his voice, but his weakness was present in his movements.

"Hey. How're you doing?"

"Oh, you know. Just lying around. Thought I'd try a new hairstyle while I was here."

"Looks real good," I played along.

Henry leaned forward conspiratorially, trying to see past me and check that the door was closed. "Don't tell anyone, but I think the one nurse has got the hots for me. Jackie. But we're trying to keep it quiet. Doctor-patient relations and all that," he said, tapping his temple as he reclined again.

I crinkled my eyes as though I actually believed what he was saying. "I gotcha. I'll keep it on the down low."

We both started laughing, but when Henry's sort of wheezing merriment turned to a cough, we subsided into calmer moods. Henry asked, "So what stories have you brought me?"

I opened my hands in front of me as I sat next to the bed. "Nothing. More work."

"It's always work," Henry said.

"I know," I admitted. "But that's what I do."

Henry nodded in acknowledgment. He paused to mute the television he'd been watching. "Any news on that promotion they've been telling you about?"

"No," I said, adjusting my sport coat over the back of my chair. "They've been saying after the next big case, but I have no idea when that's going to be."

"You need a new job, man."

"Maybe," I admitted.

Henry shook his head. "No," he said, pointing at me with the remote still in his hand. "You need to go home and find yourself a new job right now. With the case experience you have, anywhere would pick you up immediately."

"But I'd be starting over wherever I went," I said.

Henry let air pass through his lips in a mocking sputter. "So? At least you won't have to deal with these stupid hours and the whole will they or won't they situation."

"They've already told me they will."

"And look where that's left you," Henry pushed. "They told you a year ago that they'd promote you. And you're still working crappy hours for the same pay."

"It's good pay," I defended, getting frustrated.

"And other places will have good pay," Henry retorted. "Adam, just please. Take a look somewhere else?"

I sighed, beginning to say, “Henry...”

“Just look, all right?” Henry adjusted the blankets in his lap. “If you don’t find anything, no harm done.”

“When am I going to find the time, Henry?” I asked.

Henry tapped his hands on either side of his legs. “Just take a look. For me.”

I crossed my legs in my seat, leaning away from my brother. A ghostly image of my brother, but as pushy as ever. “You’re going to pull that card?”

Henry waved his hand. “Fine, then do it for Jessica, I don’t care. Just do it.”

So I agreed. It took some time, but Henry’s push was how I found another job, entry position as senior associate with a twenty percent salary increase and regular forty-hour work week. There wasn’t much advancement opportunity in the near future, but it made Jessica happy, so I took it.

## Chapter 27

I continued to visit Henry whenever he was in the hospital. To say that he was ever out of the hospital would be to express too much positivity. To say he was never out would be an understatement. But over the course of the next four months my brother spent as much time lying in a hospital bed as he did lying in his bed at home. He'd more or less had to stop walking down to the Olentangy River all together. He'd lost too much strength, and his immune system was definitely not ready to support a prolonged stay in exposed environments.

After a particularly long stint in the hospital Henry expressed his irrevocable disdain for hospital food. He made it very clear to me and to the nurses that he did not like the food, was tired of the muted taste, and though he thought it might kill him, the only reason he would continue to consume what was put in front of him was because if he didn't he would most certainly die. Either way, the food—or lack thereof—would be his demise.

I brought him a homemade meal one night. I didn't normally cook, but I thought I'd do make an attempt at replicating mom's meatloaf. With her help I prepared the loaf with mashed potatoes and oven roasted vegetables. The meatloaf was a little dry, and I added a bit too much black pepper in the vegetable dressing, but I was pleased with the results.

So we sat there eating in his hospital room. He started with the meatloaf, but only took a few mouthfuls before pausing and moving to the mashed potatoes. His appetite just wasn't what it used to be. Before he got sick, the whole plate would have been gone before I was halfway through mine. Now we sat in silence as I took turns with each item on my plate and Henry made distracted patterns in the potatoes with his fork.

"Try the vegetables," I suggested.

Henry sighed. “I’m just not hungry anymore. Besides, all this garlic would probably destroy my stomach right now.”

I looked at my plate and realized just how much minced garlic I’d added. “Just try it. One bite won’t kill you.”

I cut myself off. Henry glanced sidelong at me, his head barely moving from the pillow he was leaning against. After a moment he just smiled. He bit into a strip of bell pepper, coated with garlic and black pepper.

He didn’t say anything for a while. I went back to eating my portion, only hearing the indistinct humming of the machines around us and the clack of my fork against my plate.

“This tastes like the sweet scent of green life growing along the banks of a river.”

“What?” I asked, fork halfway to my mouth.

“That’s what these vegetables taste like.”

I pushed the food into my mouth, taking a moment to swallow before asking, “How long were you working on that?”

“Since I took the bite,” Henry smirked, scratching the back of his neck. “But no, seriously. That’s what it tastes like.”

I didn’t know what to say. It was just like Henry to try and come up with some incredibly odd way of describing things. You could hear his storytelling in everything he said, even when he was talking about vegetables. I sometimes thought he did it to show off. I set down my fork and I put my hands out in defeat. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“You know that scent when we used take bike rides down the river trails? That kind of musky, sickly sweet scent that told you things were growing?”

I narrowed my eyes and tentatively agreed, “Yes?”

“That’s what this tastes like. It feels like I’m riding my bike on along the river just before sunset when all those stupid gnats would float over the path and get in your hair and mouth. I can taste the green in the air and the wind in my throat.”

“That’s a lot to get from a bite of veggies.”

“But it’s what I feel like. I feel like I’m on the bike trail.”

I told him, “But you’re not.”

Henry looked hard at me. “I know,” he said. “But that’s how I feel.”

I shook my head.

“Just because I’m not physically doing it doesn’t mean I can’t imagine that I am.” He took another bite of the vegetables. He chewed slowly and patiently. Then he leaned his head back against his pillow and closed his eyes, his barely touched plate of food still in his blanketed lap and the quiet around us once more.

“You miss it, don’t you?” I said quietly.

Henry didn’t open his eyes. “Of course I do.”

“And Mary?”

Henry swallowed, a slow and methodical motion. “Did I ever tell you about the first time she ever spent the night?”

I shook my head, but added, “No, you didn’t,” when I realized he couldn’t see me.

“The first time she stayed the night I turned on my nightstand lamp for her because I knew she didn’t like the dark. She said, ‘You know me so well.’” He rolled his shoulders, rocking back and forth to readjust his reclined position. I remained where I was sitting, tongue pinched between my teeth and plate in hand.

“I should’ve known that I wouldn’t be able to finish all this food you brought,” Henry said suddenly, glancing down at the food in his lap.

I reached out to lift away the mostly full plate of food from his lap. He twitched the corners of his mouth in unspoken thanks. “I’m surprised you ate as much as you did.”

“I may not be able to eat as much anymore,” he said. His eyes remained closed, but he tilted his head to the side, towards where my voice sounded, where I might hear his quiet statement. “But I can still remember the taste.”

## Chapter 28

Henry fought his pancreatic cancer for five months and thirteen days, at which point he told me for the first time that he didn't feel quite himself anymore. Mom and I had taken to sitting vigil again, but lately Henry hadn't protested. It was as though he knew he wouldn't have much more time to be with us.

"Come on, Henry," I told him. "You can't say that."

Henry just chuckled, tired and short. "I can say whatever I want."

"Don't you be getting all depressed and crotchety on me."

Henry was sitting upright, his eyes open and wide at me. "Me? Old and crotchety? You sure you're not talking about yourself?"

"I am not," I protested.

"Yep," he said. "You're going to be the dad who all the kids are afraid of."

"I will not."

My brother laughed his sickly laugh again. "Adam, you gotta lighten up. You're about to be a father. Do you know if it's a boy or a girl yet?"

I shook my head. Jessica and I had only just had the first sonogram. She was three months pregnant.

"Either way," Henry said. "You gotta lighten up. You're about to be a father."

"But here you are, lying in a hospital bed."

"So?" He turned onto his hip to better face me, but he grimaced in pain as his back twinged. "Jessica will be here in six months, in a hospital bed. They help people here."

I leaned forward to rest my arms against the edge of Henry's bed. "You don't seem to be getting much help here."



“Of course it’s helping,” Henry insisted. “You and mom are both here, and I’ve gotten to experience five months of cancer treatment. It’s kinda an awful experience, but I know what it feels like now.”

“Yeah, so do we,” I snapped. “We watched you go through it.”

“Why do you think I told you and mom to stop standing watch over me day and night?” he asked. “You’ve seen it, come see me on my better days.”

“And what is today, a good day?” I retorted, gesturing to all the machines around my brother, the lack of hair on his head, the hospital gown and the emaciated form concealed by it.

“Every day is a good day.”

After five months and fourteen days Henry Cistrin—my brother, my mother’s son, my unborn child’s uncle—passed away from complications of pancreatic cancer. That day did not meet Henry’s claim.

The funeral was as funerals are. To be able to recount what I felt, what I did, is to relive every despondent moment as if it were a scar being opened again and again as a fresh wound. I was loathe to lower my brother’s coffin into the grave, unable to look away as my mother’s tears renewed on her cheeks. Jessica’s hand was on my shoulder, and my brother was dead.

How long I’d thought he’d actually live was irrelevant. He shouldn’t have had cancer in the first place, his health left him. Mary should never have left him. Dad should never have left him.

And every good thing in between was simply an incessant sounding, high-pitched whining in my ear until I wanted to block it all out. Henry didn’t deserve this. He’d been too good, too pure. He’d been right behind me every step of my life: down to the river, off to college,

into manhood. Henry was a part of the major moments in my life, only life had decided to erase him from memory.

I'd reverted to my time-honored tradition of not speaking wherever possible. Just like when dad had left, I hid myself away and closed my voice away from the world. Instead I worked later alone in my office, I went to bed sooner, turned away from Jessica. I did laundry in our basement where the sound of the dryer would drown out the high-pitched whine in my head.

But our dryer was acting up. It shook back and forth, rattling, groaning, shrieking. So I hit it. Again and again to make it stop, because a dryer shouldn't sound like that. It should be consistent and dependable, continual and understandable. No more of this random noise, no more of this sound, this unwanted pain. And so I hit it, this physical pummeling the only thing to cure it and me.

Then it stopped. The cycle finished, winding down until no more noise filled the basement room. Not even the whine in my head was there. Only me, and only the realization that Henry was truly gone, and it was never that the cancer would take his life that scared me. It was that the cancer would take his life from mine that left me with my back against the dryer, squatted on the basement floor and weeping as I finally washed the freshly opened scar.

## Chapter 29

Mr. Fulson had always served his every cone with a napkin and a crinkled smile that warned, “Make sure you lick both sides.” After he passed, though the ice cream shop still stood, the desire to go, the delicious lick of the ice cream had never been the same. I think I felt the same way about Henry’s passing. My life would never be the same again.

The difference between Henry and Mr. Fulson was that Henry’s warnings weren’t always the same, though they did seem to be as stubbornly consistent as a warning every time we bought ice cream.

I’m not sure when Henry had started to stand firm in my life, a point around which other things revolved, but it may very well have been those years in college. That last true college rager that I attended with him turned me away from the party scene and back towards who I’d been my entire life, and he continued to pester me and nag at me and interrupt my studies to call home, to go out, to get a cup of coffee.

I recalled once again the day that I’d come back to the house after work to find Henry down by the river, braced in the crook of two branches of the tree by the river. I called out to him, meaning to call him in for dinner. Mom had made her meatloaf. He told me in a minute.

“What’re you doing up there?” I stood below the branches of the tree, legs apart and my arms crossed. It’d been a long day of bagging groceries and I just wanted to go inside and eat.

Henry looked down at me, only half of his face visible behind his torso, positioned in the tree so he wouldn’t fall. “Nothing, I’m just watching.”

“Well stop watching so we can go eat.”

“I said in a minute.”

I huffed, ready to yell at him again when I noticed that there weren't even any people on the water. "You're not even watching anything!"

"What, can't I watch the water?"

"No, you see it every day. Come on, let's go," I urged, throwing in a sweep of my arm to catch his attention and draw him up the hill into the house.

Henry shook his head up in the tree, starting his climb down. "The river changes every day. It doesn't always look the same. You can learn a lot by watching it."

"And you can learn how frustrated I get when I'm hungry and tired. Get out of my tree and let's go eat."

My brother dropped from the tree, hanging on the lowest branch and swinging his legs before hitting the ground hard on his feet. "I helped someone get unstuck from the brambles downriver today."

I started walking uphill. "Good for you."

"And some days the water's a really intense blue, but sometimes it's green. And at sunset it might turn red when it reflects the sun. Lots of stuff happens on the river."

I ignored him. He just kept talking, and not walking fast enough back to the house. "Okay, so what're you trying to say?"

Henry shrugged, his feet plodding along, his knees pumping up the hill. "I don't know. It was just a good day, and I was happy to just sit by the water. You don't have to be so mean about it."

I didn't stop reprimanding him. I felt too old to be letting my brother sit in the tree all day. "Go do something, stop wasting the day just watching people float down the river."

I don't think Henry ever watched people down by the river again. Sure, he went to sit under the tree, but he was never just sitting. But neither was he following the current wherever it may take him. No, he had decided to observe and act, to take the color of the water and paint pictures in life as he went. He'd certainly covered plenty of canvas in my life.

Therefore, when Jessica entered labor I recalled Henry's words about the hospital bed, and I saw my wife lying in a room with bare walls, a hospital gown covering her. I decided to fill those walls with color. Our son, Henry, would know what it was to claim his tree by the river, to have his life full of days in different shades of blue and green, fire and light. And he'd know how much we loved him.

He'd know that his uncle would've wanted me to tuck him into bed, wrap him in my arms, and whisper in his ear, "I love you this much."